SEPTEMBER

Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

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A COMPLETE NOVEL
THE IRON STAR
by JOHN TAINE

THE YELLOW SIGN
by ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE ARE EITHER NEW OR HAVE NEVER BEFORE APPEARED IN A MAGAZINE

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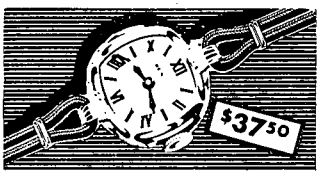

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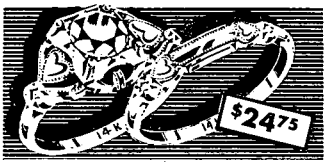

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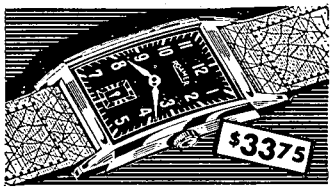

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BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING--WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT-- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

Find out how Practical it is to

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LEARNING RADIO THIS WAY IS GREAT. I'LL ENROLL NOW. SOON I'LL BE TRAINED TO MAKE GOOD MONEY FIXING RADIO SETS -- TO GET A GOOD JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION -- OR A GOVERNMENT CIVILIAN RADIO JOB -- OR WIN EXTRA RANK AND PAY IF I'M DRAFTED
LESSON

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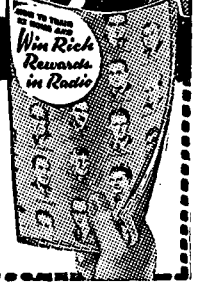

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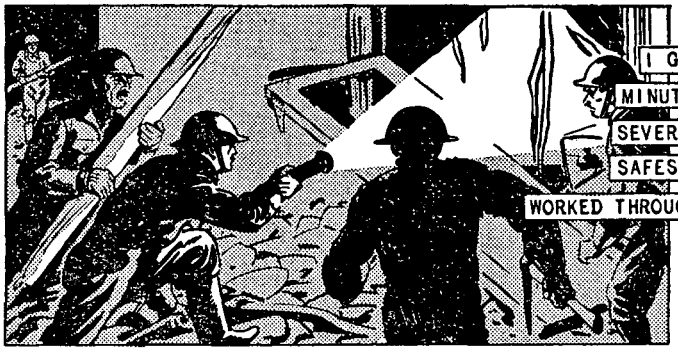

I GOT MY SQUAD ON SPOT WITHIN FEW MINUTES. ESCAPING COAL GAS OVERCAME SEVERAL RESCUERS AND MADE FLASHLIGHT SAFEST AVAILABLE LIGHT. RESCUE PARTY WORKED THROUGH NIGHT UNTIL DAYLIGHT, BOMBS CONTINUING TO ROCK BUILDING

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Keep your batteries ready for emergencies!

Mr. Mockford's experience—like many such others that have come out of England—is typical of the many emergencies that call for the use of a flashlight. Any kind of open flame would have ignited the coal gas, blocking attempts at rescue.

For your own protection, as well as to conserve materials vitally needed elsewhere in this war, follow the suggestions and instructions of your local Defense Council. Reduce the use of your flashlight to a minimum. Make the batteries last longer!

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VOL. V SEPTEMBER, 1943 No. 4

Full Book-Length Novel

The Iron Star — **John Taine** — 8

If Evolution should suddenly reverse itself and Civilized Men should revert to Prehistoric Men and even lower, can you imagine—? Three scientists dared to seek the answer, led by a strange, grim guide—a gray ape who once had been a man!

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Novelettes

Doorway Into Time — **C. L. Moore** — 116

A doorway into time . . . a place where beauty—and deadly peril—waited . . . a conqueror from a world beyond, lured by that treasure he had never seen before, the price of which could be his own existence!

The Yellow Sign — **Robert W. Chambers** — 130

"I crept, shaking, to my door, and bolted it, but I knew no bolt, no locks, could keep that creature out. . . . The King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle, and there was only God to cry to now!"

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Verse

Dwellers in the Mirage — **Nanek** — 128

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The Second Finlay Portfolio — 127

All stories in this publication are either new or have never appeared in a magazine.

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The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd st., New York City.

WELCOMES "THE IRON STAR"

Dear Editor:

Thanks very much for publishing John Hawkins' marvelous novel, "The Ark of Fire," in your March issue. It's a treat and we fans just gobbled it up.

I just received my Finlay portfolio No. 2. Human words cannot half describe the beauty of this master fantasy artist's work, and I feel that the portfolio is actually worth many times the meager price you asked for it. If any fans have the first portfolio available, please, please let me know.

I notice that at last after many years Munsey Publications has faded out of the pulp picture. When I heard about this via "Fantasy Fiction Field" I had mingled emotions. In one way I was sorry that you would not publish reprints any more. But when I read how you plan to publish famous books that have never appeared in magazine form, I was very happy. Of course there won't be any more Merritt, Kline, Farley, Giesy, Stilson, Flint Hall, Serviss, Smith, etc., but think of all the books which are practically unobtainable you will have ready to publish! Your first selection, "The Iron Star" by that master of fantasy, John Taine, is a very wise choice. Here is a list of books that I believe you should reprint.

First and by all means "The King in Yellow" by Robert W. Chambers from which you published a short story a few issues back. It is a real rarity in Fantasy and there are thousands of fans who would literally give their last cent to read it. I myself am very proud to own a copy of the first edition and include it as one of the greatest rarities in my collection which, by the way, numbers 1900 magazines and 350 books. Other books I beg you to publish are:

By Taine—"The Gold Tooth", "The Purple Sapphire", "Quayle's Invention", etc. Stapleton—"Last and First Men", "The Starmaker", "Odd John" (by all means) "Last Men in London." Wright—"The World Below", "The New Gods Lead." Also "The Purple Cloud" and "How the Old Woman Got Home" and "The Young Men are Coming," by M. P. Shiel.

There are just two kicks I have about F.F.M. One is that you are going quarterly, two is your name. *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* sounds cheap because of "Mysteries." Why not change it to *Fantasy Classics?* And that's all for this time except that I am forming a Fantasy Club in Northern California called the N.C. S.F.F. All fans living in the vicinity of Northern Calif., please get in touch with me.

HARRY HARIG.

256 26TH AVE.,
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

ABOUT "THE IRON STAR"

As one of the readers of your magazine remarked in the last issue, one of the last things in my life I thought I'd be doing would be writing a fan letter to a magazine. But here I am doing it and with ample reason. For some months previous to the appearance of the last issue, I missed seeing F.F.M. on the newsstands, and fearing that its supposed demise was due to a lack of interest on the part of the reading public, was preparing to deeply regret the passing of one of the most interesting of the pseudo-scientific type of pulp magazines. Having been a fairly constant follower of your efforts to reprint the cream of this genre of English literature, imagine then my incredulous delight at the reappearance of F.F.M with the much-vaunted novel of John Hawkins; "The Ark of Fire"!

In the many copies of F.F.M. that I have read, I have scanned with scant attention the letters printed in the Readers' Department, reserving for my own judgment the merits of the works that have seen the light of your pages. But for once I must grudgingly admit that the consensus of opinion showed remarkably good taste. Hawkins' novel was superb. The story impressed me as few of its type have. The treatment of character and romantic interest, something I have always heretofore deplored in previous stories encountered in F.F.M., was strictly in the manner of the fifth decade of the twentieth century; as refreshingly natural as life itself.

Contrast this with the stickily sentimental goo with which George Allan England or Austin Hall hamper their stories. It makes wading through them pure literary torture. Even the great Merritt is often guilty of a Mid-Victorian heavy-handedness with his characters. I can recall only five other writers who treat their characters as if they were really alive, and of those five, four are two pairs of collaborators: Edwin Balmer and Philip Wylie (a team long since dissolved) who wrote "When Worlds Collide" and "After Worlds Collide", Fletcher Pratt and L. Sprague de Camp who wrote "The Incomplete Enchanter" and "The Land of Unreason" (both of these last two are not strictly in the scientific vein) and last but not least, John

(Continued on page 141)

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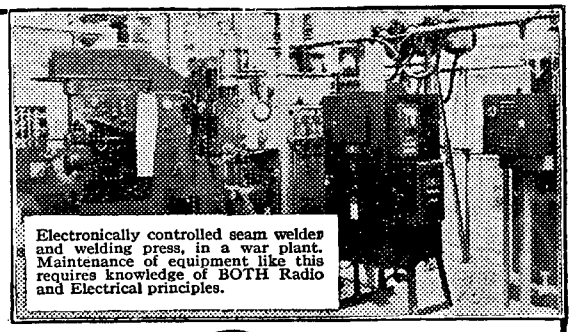

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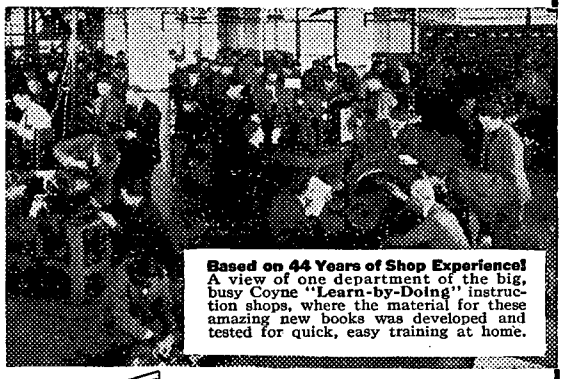

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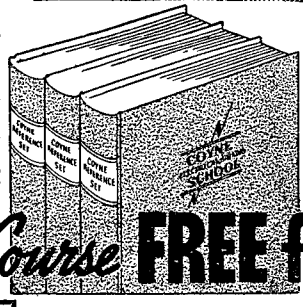

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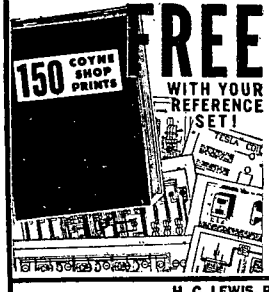

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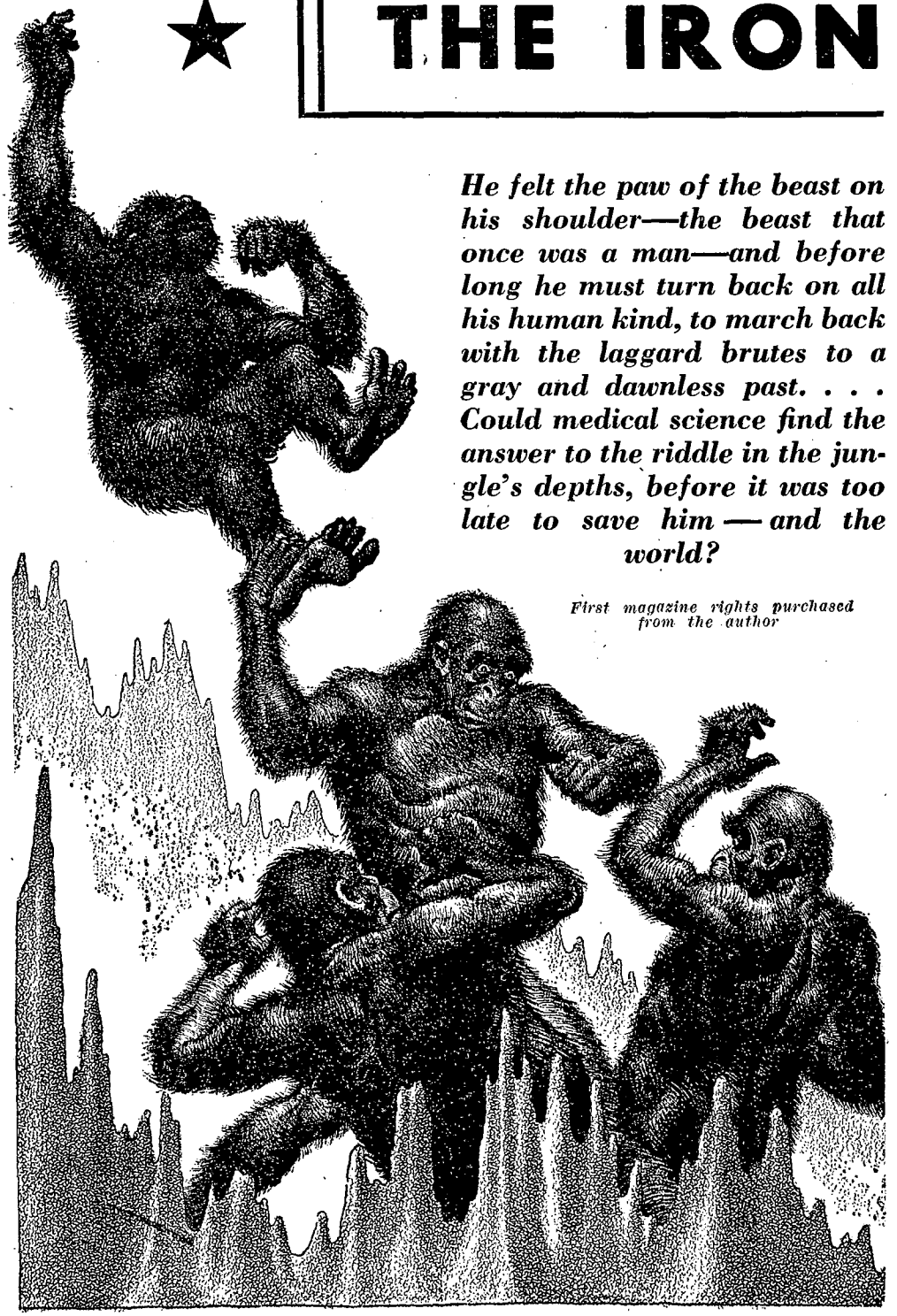
★ THE IRON

He felt the paw of the beast on his shoulder—the beast that once was a man—and before long he must turn back on all his human kind, to march back with the laggard brutes to a gray and dawnless past. . . . Could medical science find the answer to the riddle in the jungle's depths, before it was too late to save him — and the world?

First magazine rights purchased from the author



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STAR

By

John Taine

CHAPTER I

MYSTERY OUT OF THE JUNGLE

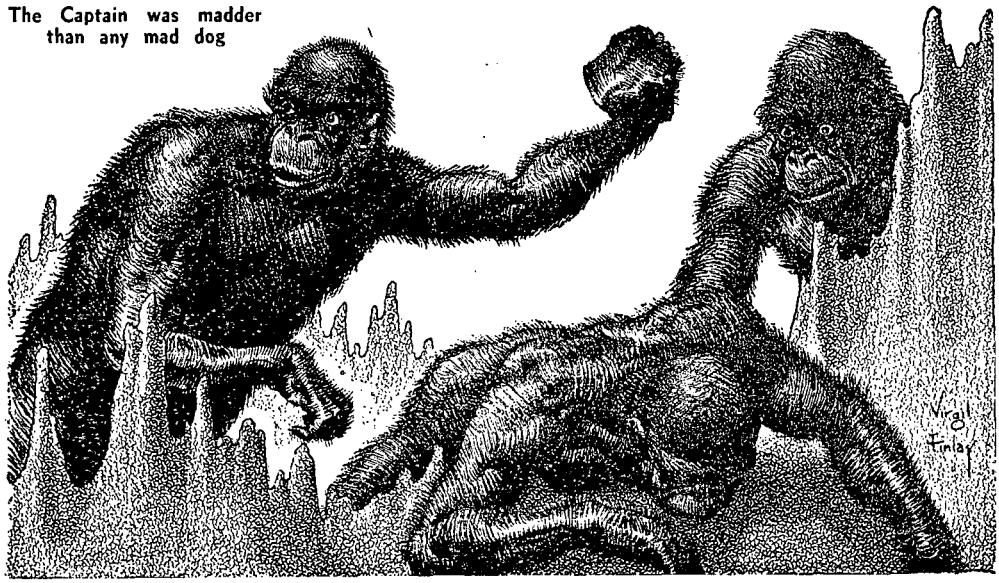
YOUNG Doctor Colton was puzzled. His patient, a grizzled, muscular man of about forty-five, showed no signs of a nervous breakdown, nor was there any evidence of organic disease. Swain had stripped to the skin, and the long drawn out examination left no part of his anatomy unexplored. Yet it had disclosed precisely nothing. Nevertheless he was a very sick man, in fact sicker than he himself guessed.

Twenty years as a medical missionary in the fever-ridden swamps and jungles of the upper Congo had sapped his vitality and rotted his character to its very roots. In his secret heart Swain knew what ailed him, yet such was his disorder that he strove to deceive even himself as to its true nature.

Once as frank and open as the day, the ex-missionary now was as tricky a liar as ever fooled a doctor. Five years after his return to America Swain had sought out Colton—"Colton of Chicago"—the brilliant leader in tropical medicine, with the self-avowed purpose of being cured, but with the subconscious desire to prove himself incurable and smarter than any physician living. And now, gloating over the doctor's puzzled frown, he felt that he had triumphed.

As he buttoned up his shirt and fastened his collar, he experienced a subtle thrill of simian cunning. Like a clever ape making a monkey of its master, he, the humble missionary, with no more science presumably than sufficed to reduce a fracture or prescribe for a colic, had routed the great Colton on his own specialty.

His disease was tropical because it had been contracted in the tropics. But neither Colton nor any other minister to human ills could name the disorder, for it was not human. Swain knew that henceforth he could sin in perfect secur-



The Captain was madder than any mad dog

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ity. If tropical medicine at its brainiest, as represented by Colton, was powerless to detect him, the Chicago police could spread no net to snare his nimble feet.

"So you don't know what is the matter with me?" he asked with an ironical smile. "I was told you are the best man in America on tropical diseases."

Colton ignored the back-handed compliment.

"You are ill," he replied slowly. "A country druggist could see that much. But I am not sure that you have come to the right man, in spite of your twenty years in the tropics." He paused, and gazed out over the flashing waters of the lake while Swain tied his shoes. "By the way," he resumed casually, "have you ever used drugs?"

An expression of virtuous obstinacy deepened the severe lines about the eyes and mouth of the retired missionary.

"I prefer to think," he replied with puritanical precision, "that I contracted some obscure tropical fever during my work in Africa."

"You do not deny that you have taken harmful drugs?" Colton persisted.

For a fraction of a second Swain hesitated. His code had long since grown sufficiently elastic to embrace lies, provided they were white, or at worst gray. With a truly animal craftiness he decided that a frank statement of the whole truth would be more deceptive than a white lie.

"No," he said, with a defiant glance at the skeptical physician, "I have never been a drug addict. I have been tempted, often, to sink to the level of the degenerate natives whom I tried to rescue. But I never gave way. You would not call the occasional use of veronal for insomnia a harmful habit, would you?"

"That depends upon what you consider 'occasional'," the doctor retorted dryly. "But I need not press the point, if veronal is your only weakness. You are not a victim of that particular foolishness—at least not yet. Something else, some less obvious vice, is at the root of your trouble." His manner abruptly hardened. "It isn't veronal, or morphine, or chloral that has made you what you are. Those things are rather hard to get, I imagine, in the jungles of the Congo. But," and his voice stung like a whip, "you discovered some rottener beastliness in that forsaken hole, and you are its slave. No doctor on earth can do you one particle of good so long as you use your perverted ingenuity to conceal your trouble. Come on, now, confess. Then I may be able to help you. Otherwise you might as well pitch your money out of the window."

"I came to your office to consult you about my health, not to be insulted. Good afternoon."

Colton laughed good humoredly. He thought he understood the tantrums of the sick, and he did, provided the patient was an ordianry human being.

"All right, Mr. Swain, if you choose to take it that way there will be no fee. So you can save your money to throw in the lake. It will be less of a waste. Drop in again when you feel like talking."

Swain slammed the door and strode through the waiting room, looking neither to right nor left. It was not merely his desire to escape from the vicinity of Colton's quiet sarcasm that drove him headlong down the hall to the elevator. His craving had taken him suddenly by the throat, and to appease his abnormal hunger he must reach the privacy of his apartment.

While waiting impatiently for the elevator he had to strain his self-control to the breaking point to refrain from wrenching open the iron gates and clambering hand over hand down the steel cable. The brutal muscles on his neck stood out like knotted cords, and his lean, powerful hands clenched and unclenched nervously. At last the elevator stopped opposite him, the gates clashed open, and he darted into the cage like a hunted beast. Half a minute later he was dashing across Michigan Avenue, dodging in and out of the traffic like a ferret, on his reckless way to the nearest I. C. station. A southbound express whisked him and his terrible disease off with a hundred normal human beings to the Hyde Park residence district.

AFTER his patient's precipitate departure, Colton paced slowly back and forth before the open windows of his office, pausing occasionally to glance down on the scudding automobiles or out over the lake, all the time thinking desperately of the man whose case had baffled him completely. It was the first serious setback to his diagnostic skill which he had encountered, and his total failure to understand the patient irritated him.

He had a curious sensation of having almost grasped the clue to a riddle whose solution eluded his mind for the lack of a single, simple word. His eyes idly ex-

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plored the signs on the windows of the office building opposite his own on the cross street, as if seeking there the key to the mystery.

Far down on the street level the tall gilt letters of a beauty parlor flashing in the afternoon sun challenged his attention. Those letters held the clue to his problem, but his mind, seeking elsewhere, did not yet register. Turning from the window, Colton resumed his slow pacing back and forth. Suddenly, and apparently from nowhere, the word for which he groped leaped into his consciousness. It was hair.

All through his minute examination of Swain, the doctor had struggled with a feeling of eerie familiarity which he could not place. Why, he puzzled, did the patient remind him so persistently of something a little less than human? And what, exactly, did Swain's body recall? Colton gave it up. The curious arrangement of the hair on Swain's body might only be one of those rare freaks of nature that mean nothing in particular.

As he now remembered it, there were numerous tiny whorls of down on certain spots of Swain's skin which, on the normal human body, are smooth and bare. The net impression left by this anomaly was decidedly unpleasant.

Colton decided to forget what he had seen. Brooding over it could do neither him nor the patient any good. Turning resolutely to his desk he set to work on the manuscript of his forthcoming book, *Man and the Amœba*. The disagreeable thought which was to uproot his life and transplant it to strange regions of which few human beings have ever dreamed, was forgotten for the moment in the alluring mazes of medical research.

In the meantime Swain, tensely muscular as a gorilla, had bounded from the express at Fifty-third Street and was hurrying west as fast as his long, ambling stride could take him. He must reach his apartment at once or go mad. Suddenly he stopped short, arrested by the shrill cry of an Italian fruit peddler.

"Banan', oranges, fresha banan', nice sweeta oranges!" the man chanted in a high treble as he pushed his barrow slowly along, close to the sidewalk.

Swain's eyes devoured the red and gold fruit heaped high on the barrow not ten feet away. His muscles tightened, and a trickle of saliva appeared at the corners of his mouth. Seeing a prospective customer in the wild-looking man by the lamp post, the peddler abandoned his push cart and hastened forward with a basket of bananas. For a moment it seemed as if the peddler would not reach the sidewalk alive.

A bestial look of insensate rage distorted the lowering face of the ex-missionary, his eyes rounded and became small as they fixed in a red glare on those of the astonished peddler, and the distended muscles of his legs tightened for the leap. But he never sprang. The expression of hatred and inhuman desire relaxed suddenly in a spasm of shocked surprise, and with a curious, ferine movement, unlike anything human, Swain swung himself by one arm round the lamp post and made off to the west with a rolling, lurching amble like that of a drunken man.

At Ellis Avenue he turned south. In a few moments he had let himself in by his latchkey, which blundered for the keyhole in his trembling fingers. Three steps at a time he sprang up the stairs to his apartment. The whole second floor was his, so he made no effort to conceal his movements.

His face working in a horrible agony, he crouched down by the side of his bed and peered under it. The small flat steamer trunk was where he had left it; no thief had tampered with his nameless treasure in his absence. One muscular hand shot under the bed and grasped the iron handle of the trunk. For perhaps thirty seconds the slave of a strange sin tugged and panted to budge that insignificant steamer trunk. At last, putting forth all the knotted strength of his back, arm and muscular chest, he got the proper leverage. Half an inch at a time the trunk was jerked free of the bed.

Whatever lay in that trunk was phenomenally heavy.

Still panting from his exertions, Swain fumbled for the key. The perspiration streamed down his face and neck as he turned the key in the lock and raised the lid.

The trunk was empty. Not so much as the customary paper or cloth lining concealed the bare boards. Swain's visiting card, with his Congo address scribbled in pencil, had been secured by a single small tack to the floor of the trunk. Beyond this somewhat unusual mark there was nothing to identify the ownership. On the outside appeared the usual steamer labels, but no name.

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SEATING himself on the edge of the bed, Swain propped his elbows on his knees and sunk his fists into his cheeks. For fully ten minutes he sat thus, with his face over the empty trunk, staring down at the tack which fastened his visiting card. Seeing him sitting there fascinated a casual observer would have jumped to the conclusion that Swain was practising self-hypnotism.

As he stared motionless at the tack his features underwent a curious transformation. It would be difficult to describe exactly the nature of the subtle change which gradually overspread the tense muscles of his face. Although it is inaccurate and at best a rough approximation to the truth, the word 'inhuman" perhaps depicts as closely as any other the changed aspect of that unfortunate man's features. Intelligence died in the eyes, and a mask of brutish indifference filmed over the blurred outlines of the mouth and nostrils. The features did not actually thicken; they merely seemed to become more gross.

At last the vacant eyes rekindled, and the slave of a strange new sin breathed deeply. Bending lower, he immersed his head in the air within the trunk and inhaled several times to the capacity of his lungs. Again the casual observer would have been deceived by too obvious appearances. What more natural than to assume that the inside of the steamer trunk had been painted with some volatile alkaloid whose powerful fumes, heavier than air, filled the interior with invisible drunkenness and drugged oblivion?

As Colton was to learn long afterward, this simple explanation was far from the truth. The evil influence, whatever its nature, was without taste, odor or color. But Colton had not yet begun his investigation of the nameless evil which, with startling rapidity, was destroying Swain's body and his soul. Before the mystery could be approached Swain must confess, and before Swain could bring himself to acknowledge his inhuman vice he must be deprived of its malignant inspiration.

A faint scratching on the farther side of the door leading to the inner bedroom brought Swain to his senses. He started up and hastened to the locked door, leaving the trunk gaping by the side of the bed. Taking a key from his pocket he unlocked the door and opened it two inches.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

An unintelligible, guttural grunt was the only response. Nevertheless Swain seemed to understand what the occupant of the inner bedroom wanted. With an impatient exclamation he glanced around his own room. Not finding what he sought, he hurriedly proceeded to the kitchen.

Presently he returned with a large pan of fresh water.

"Here it is," he said, opening the door a good two feet.

A brown, muscular arm, all but completely covered with coarse black hair, shot out and a powerful hand grasped the pan. With a shudder of revulsion Swain hastily closed and locked the door. Then, with much panting and straining, he pushed back the trunk under his bed, and with a last look around the room, hastily made his exit. In a few moments he was swinging along Ellis Avenue toward the Midway with a peculiar, lurching gait which made passers-by avoid him for a drunkard.

Disregarding the traffic signal at the Midway, he wove his hazardous way in and out between the whizzing automobiles, and hurried south toward Sixty-third Street. A fruit and vegetable store was his objective.

"Bananas," he muttered to the Italian who came to wait on him. Either the man was too slow in executing the simple order, or the evil influence which ruled him had made Swain reckless of appearances. With an inarticulate sound of rage he bounded forward, knocked the curved fruit knife from the man's hand, and wrenched the whole bunch of bananas free. Then, indifferent to the amazement on the faces of the customers in the shop, he began stripping the bananas from the stalk and devouring them, skins and all, with brutal ferocity. A dozen, two dozen, three dozen disappeared into that snarling mouth. Swain now ate but once a day, and hunger to him meant a ravenous appetite. At last he was appeased.

"How much?" he demanded, ignoring the astonishment on the Italian's face.

"A dollar and forty-five cents."

Swain paid and lurched from the shop. Turning east, he made for Jackson Park. An uncontrollable desire to escape from the clatter of the elevated railway and the jangle of the surface cars urged him forward almost at a run. Pedestrians scattered to let him through, but he seemed oblivious of the shocked wonder

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on their faces. The traffic policeman at Woodlawn Avenue shouted to him to wait for the crossing signal. The driven man only hastened his gait, and with incredible agility escaped death under the wheels of an oil truck by less than an inch.

HE REACHED the park entrance shortly before sunset. To his hunted eyes the carefully tended shrubberies and manicured trees were but a wretched substitute for the tangled mazes of the Congo. These were not trees, but pampered weaklings from some anaemic hothouse. The very air was cramped and fetid with the reek of too much humanity.

The crowds returning from the golf course or tennis courts gave this wild, haggard man with the grizzled hair a wide berth. More than one shuddered at the thought of meeting such a creature alone at night on some dark path of the park, and one couple decided to warn the police. But they forgot, or lost interest, and contented themselves with a golfer's dinner to take the bad taste of the lunatic's appearance off their minds. No more was heard of him till the next morning, when scores remembered their unpleasant experience of the previous evening.

According to the newspaper story, the policeman on guard at the bathing beach had heard shrieks in the park shortly after ten o'clock. It is notoriously difficult to locate the direction of a sound with any accuracy. The policeman judged that the shrieks came from a clump of trees at the south end of the lagoon. On reaching the spot he found nothing unusual. The moonlight showed only a tranquil expanse of lawn under the trees, and the calm surface of the lagoon without a ripple. Having investigated the surroundings to his own satisfaction, he started back toward the bathing pavilion to call up the station and report.

He returned by a different path from the one he had taken in his run to the trees. This path passed under several large willows. Hearing a slight noise above him the policeman glanced up, and distinctly saw, high up in the boughs of the willow under which he was passing, the black bulk of a man or some apelike animal hanging by its arms from a swaying branch. His order to descend being disobeyed, he warned the creature that he would shoot to kill. At the first crack of the policeman's pistol the creature seemed suddenly to come to life. With unbelievable speed and ease it swung lightly from branch to branch, leaped to the neighboring tree, flashed through it, and finally dropped on all fours to the ground. Instantly it straightened up, and in two leaps had reached a clump of shrubbery into which it disappeared with a crash of breaking twigs. The policeman fired point blank into the bushes. No cry or groan answered.

Thinking that he had shot the creature through the brain, he proceeded to investigate. Just as he broke his way into the dense growth, a dark figure started up almost at his feet and tore through the shrubs to the path on the other side. Unable to take aim on account of the twigs which fouled his arms, the policeman fired at random. All of the shots went wild, for when he finally ripped his way through to the path, he found no trace of the fugitive.

The detectives summoned from headquarters found only two sets of footprints, those of the baffled officer and another, presumably left by the fugitive. It was impossible to trace these among the hundreds on the well traveled path from the bathing pavilion to the golf links. The mystery of the shrieks remained unsolved. Probably the responsible parties disliked newspaper notoriety and were thankful to escape with nothing more serious than a bad fright.

With a general warning to the public to keep to the well lighted paths after dark, the police posted plain clothes men at strategic spots all through the park, and waited for the "maniac" to reappear. Their precautions were wasted.

THE Medical Congress was just drawing to a close. For six days the leading physicians of the United States, assembled in Chicago, had listened to discussions and lectures by world authorities in the constant fight against disease. This, the last lecture of the session, was of a popular nature and open to the public. Sir Ambrose Paget, the foremost authority on the artificial growth of human tissue, was to give an account of his work in terms comprehensible to the layman.

An hour before the lecture the huge auditorium was jammed to the galleries. Not only the medical and student population of the city had turned out in full force, but also, to judge from the bril-

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liant display of gowns and millinery, the four hundred.

Colton, wise in his generation, had arrived early and secured a seat in the first row of the balcony. With him were the famous Blakes, father and son, the experts on atomic disintegration. The scientific world referred to this unique pair as Big Tom and Little Tom. Big Tom, the father, not yet fifty, had trained his son to follow in his own footsteps. Little Tom, now twenty-four, was following so closely that Big Tom would presently be forced into a run if he was not to be hopelessly outdistanced in the race for scientific honors. Their latest work, a radical improvement of radio valves, was largely the work of Little Tom alone. At the present moment father and son were engaged in a hot argument with Colton.

"I tell you," Big Tom was saying with great emphasis, "that doctor is a fool. I no more need a change than he does. The idea of wasting a year in 'travel and rest' is merely ridiculous. A man of my temperament gets no real rest by loafing. Besides, I always detest stuffy cars and breezy steamships."

"Try a walking tour," Colton suggested. "Take it from me, all doctors are not fakes. And your man, I happen to know, is a first rate conservative of the older school. If he says you need a year's layoff, the chances are a hundred to one that you do."

"Second the motion," Little Tom concurred heartily. "If Big Tom takes a year off, I must follow suit. And I'm fed up on work for a while. We'll take that trip, and see some foreign glamour girls."

"You've seen altogether too many of the domestic breed lately," his father retorted dryly. "If we must take that rotten trip I insist upon going to some country where the women don't wear fascinators."

"The new secretary tried to vamp him," Little Tom elucidated for Colton's benefit, "and he pretended not to like it. All right, Big Tom, we'll go to Africa if you like."

"Not a bad idea, honestly," Colton agreed. "Why don't you two come with me to the Congo?"

"And get the sleeping sickness?" Big Tom objected. "No, thanks; I'm thick-headed enough as it is."

"But," Colton expostulated with an aggrieved air, "we have conquered the sleeping sickness."

"And just to prove it," Little Tom suggested, "the Institute is sending you out there to count the corpses."

"Not at all," Colton replied with some heat. "You miss the point entirely. This new drug, Bayer 205, does the trick. The Institute is sending me out to get facts and figures for a talking campaign. The business man—the fellow with the dollars—must be convinced that medical research pays, or he won't cough up any more cash. From the standpoint of tropical medicine my little expedition will be a huge joke. It is like painting a peach a blush pink. But as a talking point to get millions for our work on other diseases, my trip will be quite the tops, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do," Big Tom admitted. "One of those sirens in our accounting department said just that of my promising young son."

"Which one?" Little Tom demanded eagerly.

"Never mind," his father replied. "She resigned yesterday."

"You mean you fired her, mean, jealous old devil."

"Here, you two!" Colton admonished. "You can divide the spoils of war outside, not here. This is a scientific arena, not a prize ring. Well, think it over. I'll show you a real good time in the Congo. We need be away only nine months if you must get back. Hullo," he broke off suddenly, "I wonder what that fellow finds to interest him here?"

Colton indicated the tall, muscular figure of Swain, just about to take his seat well forward on the main floor. In a few sentences he explained to his friends what he knew of Swain, without betraying the latter's confidence.

"Used to be a medical missionary in the Congo, I believe. Tropical diseases would interest him more, I should think, than Paget's stuff on artificial growth of human tissue. I wonder if he knows what he's in for?"

"Can't say I like your friend's looks," Big Tom remarked after a close scrutiny of the unsuspecting Swain. "Rather restless, isn't he?"

"Too much Congo, perhaps," Little Tom suggested. "That's what you'll be like," he added, addressing his father, "after we come back."

"Unless the sleeping sickness gets us," Big Tom returned gloomily.

"There is no danger from sleeping sickness, I tell you," Colton reiterated with

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a show of irritation. His further remarks were cut short by the appearance of the lecturer on the platform. When the enthusiastic applause finally died down, Sir Ambrose went directly to the heart of the subject. To most of the medical men present it was already an old story, although Sir Ambrose's investigations had begun but two years previously. The rest of the audience hung breathless on the simple revelation of a new world, just dawning above the black horizon of the unknown.

AFTER the first few introductory sentences Colton found himself watching Swain. Presently he became so absorbed in the play of conflicting emotions on the ex-missionary's face that he no longer glanced at the lecturer. Fascinated fear, incredulity and secret triumph flickered across Swain's face like the changing reflections on a lake. Evidently Swain had no idea that he was being watched and pitilessly analyzed.

As Sir Ambrose briefly related the history of the experiments from which his own work had started, Swain leaned forward in his seat with an expression of rapt, morbid curiosity. The account of the startling achievement of de Seguier, now classic, in which the great French surgeon succeeded in keeping a human heart alive and beating in a weak solution of certain salts for sixty hours after its excision from the body of an executed murderer, caused a look of fearful joy to light up that tense face. As the lecturer passed to his own researches, Swain's excitement all but broke bounds.

Sir Ambrose, with admirable clearness, sketched his work on the influence of radium and other radioactive minerals. upon the growth or destruction of cells —the stuff of which we are made—when segregated from the living body. The audience, perhaps, inferred more than the lecturer said or even hinted.

He did not assert that it is possible to make dead flesh live, nor did he declare that he could control the growth of human tissue at will. Yet, from what he did set forth as sober scientific fact, it was but an easy and natural step for a mind untrained in the cold, precise language of science to infer that Sir Ambrose Paget, the great medical expert, had indeed asserted these very things. Such is the usual outcome of the average popular scientific lecture.

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3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves
4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

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Although he strove to be conservative to a fault, Sir Ambrose did not wholly succeed. More than one layman in the audience left the hall with the fixed and ineradicable belief that it is possible, by the proper use of the right chemicals or radioactive emanations—"rays," in the vague language of the street—so to control the ductless glands of the human body that physical appearance, sex, character and brain power can be profoundly modified if not wholly transformed. Sir Ambrose said nothing of the kind. The nearest he came to it was a mild prophecy that some day, somehow, such things will be commonplaces of every doctor's office. Then, he playfully declared, it will be a matter of simple routine to change idiots into geniuses and criminals into saints.

Further, he ventured to prophesy in the same humorous vein, it will be easy, by spraying a patient's ductless glands with the appropriate type of "rays" to make two hairs sprout where none grew before, and so to endow the bald with thatches and the ladies with beards. With this comforting word of hope to the hairless he concluded his brilliant lecture, and bowed himself off the platform to the accompaniment of volleys of applause.

It is to be regretted that the press, in announcing Sir Ambrose's lecture, omitted to state that he is as well known in England for his pauky sense of humor as for his dryer contributions to medical research. It seems to be as dangerous for an Englishman to joke in New York or Chicago as it is for an American to joke in London or Manchester. They should not do it.

No profounder impression, true or false, was produced on any member of the audience than upon Swain. From the dazed, triumphant look on his face as he rose to leave the hall, Colton inferred that every shot, blank or bullet, had found its easy mark.

"Well," said Big Tom with a sour grimace, "how did you like it, doctor?"

"How did you?"

"So-so. Good enough for a Sunday supplement story, but not quite up to the level of this crowd. He must think we're a lot of boobs."

"Not necessarily. I mean perhaps we are. Excuse me. I'll see you both tomorrow, and we can make our plans for the Congo."

Colton hurried down to the entrance to intercept Swain before he could get away. He wished the encounter to appear accidental. Luck favored him. He reached the ground floor just as Swain emerged.

"Well," he began, "how did you like the lecture?"

Swain seemed disinclined to be communicative.

"All right," he replied noncommittally, and started to elbow his way through the crowd.

The doctor was not to be so easily shaken.

"I thought he was a trifle radical toward the end. Didn't you?"

"No."

Colton affected surprise at the curt denial.

"You have read about these things?"

Swain shot him a suspicious glance.

"Why shouldn't I if I like?" he demanded.

"No reason at all. In fact I should be very much surprised if you, an old medical campaigner with lots of spare time on your hands, did not keep up your reading. Which way are you going?"

"Home."

"Well, let's walk part of the way together. Where do you live?"

"Ellis."

"That suits me fine. I need a breath of fresh air after that stuffy hall. I live on the other side of Washington Park, so we can go past your place. By the way," he remarked with a pleasant laugh, "you're not sore, are you, about what I said the other day? You have no cause to be. Just consider it as between any doctor and any patient."

Swain stopped short.

"Look here," he snapped, "what do you want with me? I'm not consulting you."

Colton refused to be put out.

"Who said you were? I just proposed a stroll together on our way home, as we happen to be going in the same direction. There is one thing I never stand for," he laughed, "and that is to have my former patients get sore at me. I do them as little harm as I know how, and I expect them to overlook my blunders."

Swain grunted, and Colton continued.

"Now we're getting onto a human basis. You asked what I want with you. Just this; it's very simple. The Institute people are sending me out to the Congo to get statistics on the sleeping sickness. You have heard about the Bayer's cure, of course? Well, they want me to find out

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how it works in the field. And I want you to give me any pointers you may have as to my outfit. What does a white man traveling through the jungle need? What is the least he can get along with?"

Swain's suspicions, if he had any, were allayed. He became almost garrulous in a surly, dog-in-the-manger fashion. The doctor seemed perfectly satisfied, and did not once recur to personal matters. At Fifty-fifth Street he bade his former patient good night, and turned west toward Washington Park.

COLTON was halfway across the park when he heard a terrified shout, followed almost instantly by a shot. Thinking it was a holdup, he dodged behind a tree and waited. Unarmed, he could be of little assistance. He must think what to do. Hearing nothing further, he crept cautiously toward the clump of trees from which he judged the shot had been fired. The shrill summons of a police whistle quickened him into a run.

Reaching the trees, he saw by the soft glow of the moonlight a policeman bending over a black form huddled in a pathetic mass at his feet. In that pitiful resignation to death of the creature that would never again taste the freedom and joy of life there was something inexpressibly sad and touching.

"I had to shoot," the officer apologized, "It was a shame to kill the poor beast, but I thought it was one of these park prowlers."

Colton bent over the dark, still figure.

"Escaped from the circus or the zoo, I suppose," he remarked.

"I guess so. What is it?"

"Some kind of an ape, I should judge. What a magnificent specimen! Just look at the muscles on that arm."

Two patrolmen hurrying up from the avenue cut short the conversation.

"Did you get him?" the first asked.

"Couldn't help myself. I saw this up the tree, just as Brown did at Jackson Park, and fired when it didn't answer. This gentleman says it's an ape."

Colton handed the officer his professional card.

"The Medical College would be glad to have the carcass for the comparative anatomy class. Ask the sergeant to call them up. They will pay whatever is reasonable."

With a good night to the three he resumed his walk home.

The morning papers featured the story, thankfully pointing out that the Jackson Park mystery was now cleared up, and lovers might enjoy the moonlight without fear of being strangled. They added that the City police, acting on the suggestion of Dr. Colton, had donated the carcass to the Medical College to be dissected and studied. The body was that of an exceptionally large and well-formed female ape. It had been shot clean through the heart.

The pathetic picture in the moonlight still lingered on Colton's mind with a strange persistence. What was there about that huddled body that made it so ineffably sad? Trying to forget what he had witnessed, he pulled himself together and went down to his office in the Loop. To his relief he found Big Tom and Little Tom waiting for him. Soon the trio were in animated discussion.

Big Tom had secretly made up his mind to take a year off and accompany Colton to the Congo, but to save his face he wished to be persuaded against his official will. Little Tom, having only an avid appetite for adventure and no official will to work when he didn't want to, clamored for immediate departure.

The argument was at its height when the secretary rapped on the door.

"Come in," Colton cried.

"Mr. Swain would like to see you at once in private. He says it is urgent."

The two Toms hastily made their exit.

"Did you see his face?" Little Tom whispered, as they gained the hallway.

"Yes," his father replied, with a glance back at the waiting room. "And I hope I never see an expression like that again on any face. It was hellish."

Swain stumbled into the consulting room. After one look at him Colton hastily locked the door.

"Well?" he said.

"The Medical College must not get that body."

"Why?"

"She was my wife."

CHAPTER II

MAD IMPULSE

EVEN the little that Swain confided to him convinced Colton that the body must be destroyed immediately. The most cursory examination by any medical student would reveal the startling truth that it was a human cada-

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ver, and not that of a female anthropoid ape.

Colton thought rapidly. He stepped to the telephone, called the police, and asked if the body of the ape shot last night in Washington Park had been sent out to the Medical College. Receiving a reply in the negative he sprang his hastily prepared fabrication. The owner of the ape, he said, had just called to inform him of the facts in the case. The ape had been kept in close confinement and under strict watch for several months until last night, when it escaped during the owner's absence at a medical lecture. For at least two months it had suffered from an extremely dangerous tropical disease.

In seeking to cure his pet the owner himself had contracted the same malady. Evidently, therefore, the disease was contagious, and like glanders, for instance, communicable from animals to man. The owner, Colton asserted, was actually in his office at that moment consulting him about his own sickness. In view of the obvious danger, would the police see that the body was at once cremated? Colton would take the responsibility and square things with the Medical College, of which he was clinical professor in tropical diseases.

At the other end of the wire there was a sudden commotion. The police could not set about the necessary business fast enough. Colton resumed his care of Swain.

The wretched man was in terrible shape. In spite of the mild opiates which Colton made him swallow he continued to start and tremble at nothing, as if tormented by some invisible fiend. His enemy was taking a cruel revenge. Like all victims of evil habits Swain deserved pity, not censure. It was not his fault that his character was what it was, but the unpunishable crime of generations dead and forgotten. He should never have been thrust "but half made up" into a world that gives no quarter to the weak or the defective, to battle for his life and his soul against insuperable odds.

How was he, once conceived, to alter the inalterable, and adjust a normal balance between the upper part of his brain and the lower? The upper, reasoning half was far above normal. Swain's intelligence placed him well in the top tenth of the population. But morally he was little better than an imbecile. Literally he was emotionally insane, without the power to choose between good and evil, or between sane constructiveness and idiotic ruin, and all because his lower brain was definitely, physically malformed before he was born.

No science yet perfected could change the structure of that pitiably misshapen brain. To the end of his bitter life he must blunder and bruise himself, body and soul, against a society whose only remedy for his kind is the gallows or the electric chair. Sooner or later he must commit the capital crime.

Thus far his errors had been abnormal, inhumanly perverted dallyings with the unspeakable. Science had not yet invented a name for his disease. That it had taken the unnatural course which it followed was due solely to the accident of a life in the jungles of the Congo.

Given a civilized environment, his unbalanced brain must have driven him to one or other of the banal, brutal excesses which sometimes seem to make all of our civilization and its science a farce. And the black truth, the challenge to our cocksure ethics and imperfect laws, is the sober fact that Swain was not a great rarity. Two men out of every hundred in any civilized society are afflicted with precisely the same fundamental defect of the brain. From this two per cent the constant army of the criminal is steadily recruited.

All this passed through Colton's mind as he tried to make the stricken wretch less miserable.

"Damn all sentimentality and half-way reforms," he said with dispassionate emphasis as he sat watching the thing before him. "There is one and only one cure for your disease, Swain. Prevention is the proper medicine. But will the sob-loving public ever come to it? Not in my lifetime."

The telephone jangled, and he answered the call.

"Police? Yes, this is Dr. Colton talking. You have disposed of the body? Fine; it was too dangerous a specimen to have lying around loose. What? Oh, just your hands in lysol and water—a teaspoonful to a pail. Yes, you may as well burn your clothes for safety. There is not much danger, but it is just as well to be on the safe side. What's that? No, it hadn't struck me. As you say, there's a screw loose somewhere. He's still here; I'll ask him."

Putting his hand over the mouthpiece, Colton turned to Swain.

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"The sergeant wants to know how you explain the Jackson Park incident. I told him that last night was the first time the thing had escaped. So the Jackson Park one cannot have been what they shot last night. Had you two of them?"

"Tell him she must have got out without my knowledge, and slipped back again to the apartment before I returned."

This explanation seemed to satisfy the police.

"He's sure he hasn't another of the brutes?" the sergeant persisted.

"You only had the one?" Colton repeated, again covering the mouthpiece.

Swain broke into a horrible, agonized laugh.

"Only one here. My daughter died five years ago, just before my wife and I left the Congo to come to America."

"He's perfectly plain on that point, sergeant," Colton resumed over the wire. "If you like you can search his apartment. It won't be necessary? All right. Much obliged; good-by."

The doctor stood looking down on his distraught patient.

"Feeling better? Have another shot of this?"

He deftly administered a hypodermic of morphia.

"You don't feel like talking yet? Very well. Any time you wish to confide in anyone I'll listen. Now, just one thing more. You are not the lost sinner you say you are. All this chatter about sin is the bunk, anyway. You're sick—physically ill. What you need is medical attention, not hell fire sermons calling you to repentance. Come back tomorrow morning at nine sharp. I'll see what can be done about it all. Here, take two of these the moment you get home, and go to bed. They'll make you sleep."

SWAIN was indeed not the "lost sinner" that he thought himself. The memory of his daughter's tragic end, and the still bleeding horror of his wife's death, awakened the rudimentary stirrings of remorse. It was not the emotion which normal human beings experience, but something more primitive, as old as evolution. He could not bring himself to picture his wife as she had been in the days of her bloom. Not for five years had he thought of her as the young girl and gay wife who gladly gave up all to follow him. Still, almost to the last, and long after the terrible change which transformed her into something not human had begun to efface her charm and womanly beauty, he had been tender to her.

During the last stages of her illness he had not trusted himself to look at her. Nor had she sought to show herself. To the last, when new instincts overmastered the dying remnants of her human reserve, she had been content to crouch behind a locked door. And so it happened that her keeper never knew how ghastly was the progress of her disease, but only guessed the lesser half of it from the rapidly changing appearance of the arm thrust out to grasp the fruit and water which kept her alive.

It was the memory of that arm which pointed his way through hell. And it was the thought of what her last struggle with the brute nature which finally overpowered her human instinct for concealment must have been, driving her like a lash of fire to escape from the confinement of her cage and range free under the stars, that stirred his remorse. She who had been so proud, so clean, had finally thrown decency to the winds and sought the trees, the stars and the waters which called her with a new voice, with a voice not heard by human beings.

At the last she had ceased to be human, as her daughter before her had ceased to be human and found death with the beasts. Swain pitied her, so far as pity was possible to his deformed mind, with a new understanding. He too felt the paw of the beast on his shoulder, and knew that before long he must turn his back on all his human kind, to march back with the laggard brutes to a gray and dawnless past.

Stunned and bruised by his battle with the ineluctable truth of nature, he stumbled into his bedroom. Perhaps it was merely the drugs which Colton had pumped into him, and not the embryo stirrings of remorse, which made him for once forget his unnatural craving.

With a groan of utter despair he flung himself face downward on the bed and waited for his throbbing brain to burst and blind him. He had forgotten the opiate in his pocket. Nothing remained in his consciousness but the sense of irreparable loss and the full knowledge of death.

The oblong of sunlight from the open window crept slowly round with the hours, narrowed to a thin spear of white fire as it passed inch by inch over the

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prostrate figure, and became extinct. The deepening purple of the sky hinted the advent of evening, and still the slave of a futile grief lay motionless as a fallen pillar. With the first hint of darkness he stirred, raised himself into a sitting posture, and stared about the room. Remorse still gripped him. Rising unsteadily to his feet he stamped to restore his circulation, stretched, and shook himself together. He was in the mood for a great renunciation.

Like many a penitent he did not stop to reckon the cost of repentance. Only the glow of the moment suffused his features; the cold, irremediable despair for his rash righteousness was to come later, when the transitory urge to a new life had shot its mark. A drug addict, or the victim of any other tyrannical vice, who deliberately and finally cuts himself off from the means of gratifying his evil habit is either a saint or a fool. It is heaven to repent; it is hell to reform.

An insane strength seemed to possess the wretched man as he wrenched the accursed trunk from under his bed, hoisted it on his shoulder, and staggered to the door. Yesterday he could no more have lifted that dead weight above his knees than he could have stopped an express train with his hand. But this evening he was inspired, or insane. His strength was that of a dozen madmen.

Gaining the open air he reeled with his intolerable burden for block after block toward the bathing beach. No man in his senses could have carried that weight a yard. Swain reached the pier without once putting it down. His lips were blue, and his eyes bulged from their sockets as he panted along the pier to the ticket gate, and still he did not falter. The steamer for the municipal dock was on the point of departure when he staggered aboard and, an inch at a time, lowered the trunk to the deck close to the guardrail.

The crowd of pleasure seekers regarded him curiously, but he paid no attention. He seemed to be alone, as indeed he was, cut off from the world of men. His thoughts were not their thoughts. Where they saw the freshened waters of the lake and the twinkling swarms of the city lights beyond, he visioned the lazy current of a great river and the stark brilliance of innumerable stars thickly studded in a tropical sky. The distant park to them was an orderly pleasure ground of walks and shrubberies; to him it was the wild tangle of a trackless jungle, dim and mystical in the moonlight.

FIFTEEN minutes out from the pier he brushed aside his revery, and acted. The mad impulse to sever himself forever from his evil habit blurred his reason and endowed him with the sudden strength of twenty maniacs. Before he knew what he had done the trunk had splashed and sunk to the bottom of the lake. And instantly he knew that he had been a fool. Life without the means of gratifying the unnatural passion which had enslaved him would be an unendurable torment. He had repented, and now when it was too late, he knew that he was damned.

The shouts of the passengers brought the officers and deckhands on the spot on the run. What had this wild looking man pitched overboard? A trunk? Ah, it was all clear; another of those "trunk murders." The man must be seized and handed over to the police when the steamer reached the municipal dock.

Swain only dimly comprehended what was going on. Instinct saved him. He was over the side in a flash, swimming like an ape for the beach. The captain drew his revolver and took aim at the bobbing head, fast disappearing in the choppy water. Then he hesitated. Had he any right to shoot? What had the man done, anyway? Who knew definitely what was in that trunk? Nobody! Well, it was up to the police. His duty was to notify them as soon as possible. If there was anything amiss they were the proper authorities to set it right. He slipped his revolver back into his pocket. Swain for the moment was free. But his passion swam with him, stroke by stroke, and the paw of the beast tightened its grip on his shoulder.

That night Chicago experienced one of the strangest crimes in all its bizarre history. There was a touch of the ludicrous about this latest addition to the city's depressing annals which caused even the stolid police sergeants to smile. That any man could have gone to such trouble to steal thirty cents worth of stale fruit—bananas at that—was somewhat of a joke. Many a yegg had expended less effort to loot a bank.

Colton heard of the freak crime before the midday editions of the papers headlined it. The Blakes were in his office when the Hyde Park police station called him up.

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"Dr. Colton? There's a man here, Swain, who says you know him. Ever hear of him?"

"I believe I recall the name," Colton admitted cautiously. "What about him?"

"Was he a patient of yours?"

"Hold the line while I look up my case records."

Colton put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Big Tom.

"What would you do in my fix? Swain is evidently in trouble. Shall I say I know him, or not? I want to get him out if I can."

"Say you treated him for a nervous breakdown," Big Tom advised. "Then, whatever he has done can be excused on the ground of a temporary relapse."

"Is that you, Sergeant? Yes, I know Swain well now. He is booked for an appointment at nine, I see, but I forgot it when he didn't turn up. His name escaped me for the moment. He was in here a day or two ago complaining of insomnia. A plain case of nervous exhaustion, I should say. Yes, that's right. No, I shouldn't hold him responsible just now for his actions. He's probably delirious—fever-crazy, you know. Oh yes, he will get over it all right. All he needs is a rest in bed with proper nursing. What's that? Drugs? No, he is not a hophead. I know that he has taken no drugs except veronal occasionally for sleeplessness. Perhaps I had better come out and see him? All right. Thanks, I will."

"Come on," he said to the two Toms. "I'm no diplomat. We must get that fellow out of the hoosegow somehow or other."

"Why?" Little Tom demanded. "Is he a particular crony of yours?"

"Not yet. Before I finish with him I hope to make him my bosom friend. That fellow knows a lot that he won't tell."

AT THE police station Big Tom established diplomatic relations by a liberal distribution of cigars.

"These men will put up bail if necessary," Colton announced.

"The deuce we will," Big Tom muttered under his breath. "What makes you think that?"

Colton's only reply was a gentle kick on the shin.

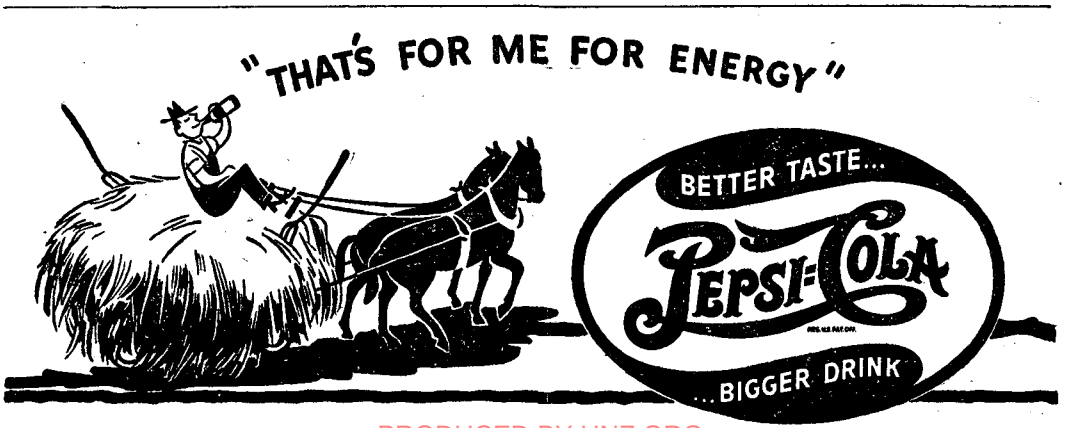
"What's the charge against him, Sergeant?"

"Burglary."

"Pretty serious, eh? Well, I'm not surprised. A man in Swain's condition is likely to do almost anything unless he's watched. He ought to be home, in bed. I'll bet his temperature is about 104 right now. How did it happen?"

"It's a queer case. He took no care whatever to conceal his movements. The patrolman on Fifty-fifth Street was going his rounds last night about ten o'clock, when he noticed that the iron gates of a fruitstand had been wrenched open. The bars were bent as if somebody had tried to force an entrance with a jimmy, and the steel padlock lay on the sidewalk. It had been sprung by sheer brute force.

"The patrolman knew there was nothing much of value in the shop, as the cash register is emptied every day at closing time. So he felt a little bit leery about going in to investigate. Just as he got inside he heard a sound of quick, steady eating, like an animal at its food. He switched on his flashlight and saw your man Swain stuffing bananas in his mouth at a pace to beat the monkeys. That fellow must like fruit. The only reason he gave for burglarizing the store



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was that he felt hungry, and it was long past his dinner time."

"The whole incident is natural enough," Colton replied, "to a man suffering from such a breakdown as Swain's. Is that the whole story?"

"Not quite. His clothes were sopping wet."

"Probably he had been taking a swim earlier in the evening," Little Tom suggested, quite in the Sherlock Holmes manner.

"You're a smart young fellow," the sergeant remarked with a sour, sarcastic grin. "What's your line, anyway?"

Little Tom was squashed.

"Bull," he answered humbly, and the sergeant was appeased.

"So I guessed," he snorted. "Well, doctor, what do you make of the wet clothes?"

Colton cast about desperately for some guess which would not compromise Swain. Big Tom came to his rescue.

"Perhaps you have forgotten," he remarked to the doctor, "about what happened the other day? Don't you remember telling me how you found Swain spending the afternoon in his bathtub?"

"Of course! A man with a fever like Swain's would be as likely as not to take a swim fully dressed in the lake."

"That's just what he did," the sergeant admitted, quite impressed by Colton's medical skill. He made a mental note to call in the doctor the next time he suffered from too much Scotch and soda. With unsuspecting frankness he related the incident of the nut who had pitched his trunk overboard before trying to walk ashore.

"As for the burglary," he concluded, "he has offered to pay for the bananas and the damage he did to the iron gates. But it beats me how he could have forced them open, and broken off that steel padlock, with nothing but his hands."

"Just the strength of a high fever," Colton explained offhandedly. "We may as well take him home now, I suppose."

"Sure. He's sick, all right. I just wanted to get in touch with the right parties."

"My friends have a room all ready for him," Colton announced, with a wave of the hand toward the Blakes. "They'll see that he doesn't get out till he has fully recovered."

"Who told you that lie?" Big Tom asked in a stage whisper which, luckily, the sergeant failed to overhear. At the moment he was on his way to fetch Swain.

"Well, here are your friends," he said when presently he returned with his prisoner. "Is this your doctor?"

Swain, shaking like a frightened horse, started to reply. Then an extraordinary thing happened. He seemed to lose control of his chest and his legs. He crumpled up and hunched suddenly to the floor on all fours. Then, whining like an animal, he took three or four ambling steps toward Colton, the knuckles of his hands tapping awkwardly on the stones.

The four spectators looked on in pitying horror. To the sergeant and the Blakes it was merely an exhibition of the depths to which a man temporarily insane by sickness will sink. To Colton, who had seen Swain's wife before her body cooled, the tragedy had a deeper significance.

"I guess he's sick, all right enough," the sergeant observed.

"He's in worse shape than I thought," the doctor admitted. He spoke sharply to Swain. "Straighten up! Come on home. I'll take care of you."

With an expression of dazed surprise Swain tottered into a human posture and quietly followed the doctor out of the station.

THE Belgian mailboat, *Ville de Liège* of Antwerp, was steaming briskly along the drab West Coast of Africa, en route to Matadai, the portal to the vast Congo basin with its rivers and impenetrable forests, its sleeping sickness and its smallpox, its deserted native villages and abandoned trading posts, and its irresistible call to every human being who has once lived in its alluring, pestilent wilds. It has been said, and possibly it is true, that an exile spent in the Congo begets a sort of recurrent fever to return, so that whoever has once been infected with its perverse charm craves incessantly to suffer again.

Of the party who stood well forward, viewing the monotonous coastline, only one was answering the Call. Swain had begged to be allowed to accompany Colton on his trip of investigation, declaring that life anywhere but in the dank forests of the Congo, now that his wife was dead, was a torment not to be endured. He pointed out that he would be an invaluable guide and aid in the latter's work, for he himself in his term as a medical missionary had given much time to the sleeping sickness. Colton did not credit this plausible reason for Swain's

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eagerness to revisit the Congo at its face value. Fully aware that his patient was concealing his true motives, Colton kept his suspicions to himself and accepted Swain's offer. The ex-missionary was to pay his own expenses, except when acting as guide. During the passage from Antwerp, Colton kept as close a watch as he dared over the erratic invalid, for Swain was still in a precarious condition mentally.

The conviction that not the sleeping sickness but Swain's illness was to be the major objective of his expedition, gradually strengthened its hold on Colton's mind as he studied the man's eccentric behavior. The work for which he was being paid was merely a routine job. It would take time, but little else. The mystery of Swain's disorder, however, might well tax his ingenuity to the limit. Here was something new to science, a living challenge to the doctor's powers as an investigator. He vowed to solve the problem or leave his bones in the forest. He came very nearly doing both.

Big Tom had finally been persuaded by his son's need of a change. It is not true that Little Tom needed a change of any kind, except perhaps a little more work and a little less partying, but it was so much easier to blame him for the expensive holiday than to lay it to himself, that Big Tom joyfully followed the line of least resistance and saved his face behind his son's back. As a sop to his demoralized conscience he had carted along with him half a ton of expensive apparatus. With this he played in the evenings, pretending that he was making important discoveries in the X-ray analysis of crystals. He deceived nobody, not even himself. Colton looked on this half-ton of excess baggage with extreme disfavor.

"Who do you expect is going to lug all that junk through the swamps and jungles?" he demanded irritably twenty times a day.

"Heaven knows," Big Tom piously replied, "I don't."

"Why do you take it?"

"What shall we do with the evenings?"

"Sleep," Little Tom suggested with sinister meaning.

That balmy word never failed to rout Big Tom. At the slightest hint of anything bordering on sleeping sickness he would become glum and silent. In his brass bound steamer trunk there was a private cache of Bayer 205 sufficiently large to cure a sleeping county. Castor oil would have been more practical baggage. Heaving a morose sigh he would quit the gay party and sneak into his cabin. Once there he would unlock his trunk and reassure himself that his treasure was still unviolated. If he had known of Swain's similar obsession he would have been entirely sympathetic.

As it was, Big Tom had developed a hearty dislike for the unfortunate ex-missionary. At first he had tried to be decent, but Swain's persistent, boring questions on all manner of scientific topics had finally driven the long-suffering Big Tom to curt incivility.

"What the devil is that to you?" he retorted more than once, as Swain, the picture of a nervous wreck, hovered over the intricate apparatus asking questions and biting his nails or clawing at his face. "What's on your mind, anyway? Can't you see I'm busy? Go and bother Colton—or Little Tom. They got me into this."

"But what—" the tormented wretch would persist, only to be cut short by the exasperated experimenter.

Naturally, not much love survived between the two. Big Tom looked upon "the hophead"—as he mistakenly dubbed Swain—as an unmitigated pest with the brain of a mosquito. But that he was a scientist with a normally balanced mind, Big Tom could cheerfully have pitched this curiously apelike nuisance of a man overboard to the sharks or the sunfish, or whatever it might be that scavenged these muddy seas.

SWAIN for his part was less clear-headed about his emotions. Perhaps, if he had succeeded in translating what he felt into words, he would have expressed a longing to sink his canine teeth viciously into the flesh of Big Tom's capable right hand. But he was so far along the road to the past, and progressing so rapidly toward a dim gray world of primitive shadows, that he no longer tried to rationalize his emotions. To him, as to certain artists and most animals, the thing and what he felt toward it were one and the same. He had already lost one of the chief powers which distinguish man from the beast. He no longer was capable of abstraction.

It is a great pity that Swain had never learned to draw or to paint; he was too far gone to write. For this defect in Swain's education the world is today the poorer by the supreme artistic master-

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piece toward which it has striven since the last ice age, and toward which it will fruitlessly strive for ages to come.

Swain was all compact of feeling, emotion, sensibility—call it what we will—and totally destitute of intellect or even sense. The picture that he might have painted would have been pure emotion, clear as a diamond, muddy as ditchwater, chaste as ice, lawless as fire, mystical, comprehensible in the ultimate sense of utter senselessness, self-revealing, self-contradictory. It would have been all of these, for it could not have exhibited one spore of that mildew which blights all art, even the highest, intelligence. The picture that Swain might have painted will hang forever on the azure walls of the fourth dimension. There will never be another Swain; Big Tom and his unfeeling associates locked the door to that mystic gallery of a higher universe and threw the key where nobody will ever think of looking for it.

If Big Tom's enjoyment of the trip was not as keen as it might have been, Little Tom's perpetual picnic more than compensated. Two minutes after the mail boat cast off from the pier at Antwerp he discovered a goldmine of delight. At least her hair was that color, and the rest of her, from the trim little shoes to the firm chin slightly contradicted by a piquant nose, was a challenge to all mankind. Little Tom accepted the challenge. He soon discovered that Lila Meredith was no merely photogenic glamour girl. but a ludicrously serious-minded damsel who took life and herself very gravely indeed—except when her sense of humor got the better of the universe and, incidentally, of herself.

When Big Tom first came upon them, some fifteen minutes out from Antwerp, he found his promising son sitting with the beauty behind a ventilator, holding forth on the nobility of the teaching profession. Being introduced to the lady, he deftly took the conversation into his own more experienced hands. Here was indeed a charming deck companion. His opinion of his son's taste in girls rose several points. But she was not the girl for Little Tom; obviously a young woman of her remarkable talents would prefer the company of an older, more sophisticated man—himself, for instance. In half an hour he had learned her life history, while Little Tom, with an enigmatic grin on his face, sat silently taking it all in and waiting his turn.

Lila Meredith was proud of her record, and took no pains to conceal the fact. She had graduated in English from some frightful college in the Middle West at the phenomenal age of eighteen, and had immediately taken up the white man's burden in Canton—China, not Ohio. There she had taught in the college for four years, vainly battling to make three hundred Chinese youths say rice when they meant rice, and not lice. At this point of her narrative Little Tom performed a feat of lightning calculation, and noted that eighteen and four make twenty-two. She didn't look a day over seventeen. Being an unusually intelligent girl, she realized after four years of it that she was beaten. All the l's in the Chinese language were immovably displaced by the devil shortly after the Flood. With this outstanding discovery to her credit she left the three hundred still clamoring for parasites, and returned to her beloved Middle West.

She had loved it when she left it. Even in China she had continued to worship her home town. But when she saw it at close quarters, and not through a sentimental haze several thousand miles thick, she wanted to shut her eyes. Before the first week was out she knew that she was a natural-born wanderer.

After China the next step of course was India. So many American girls work in the Indian missions, trying to awaken their sisters who love nothing so much as sleep, that Lila thought it would be easy to land one of the desirable, romantic positions. It was easy. The other girl got the job. Lila's rival had the advantage of two years' Japanese experience—quite respectable—in addition to the regulation four years of Canton.

But Lila Meredith, having tasted blood, thirsted for gore. She had seen one corner of the world; now she would see it all. Her luck was in. To that terrible college in the Middle West came a despairing cry from the Congo. "Send out to us a young woman," cried the united voices of the Rev. Jonas Simpkins and his helpmate, "send out to us a young woman to help us in our mission to the heathen. Let her be one wise in the proper use of calico, for these degenerate sons and daughters of Ham use pants as earmuffs and petticoats as mufflers." This, of course, was not what the Simpkinses actually wrote; it is, however, an accurate although free translation into the vernacular.

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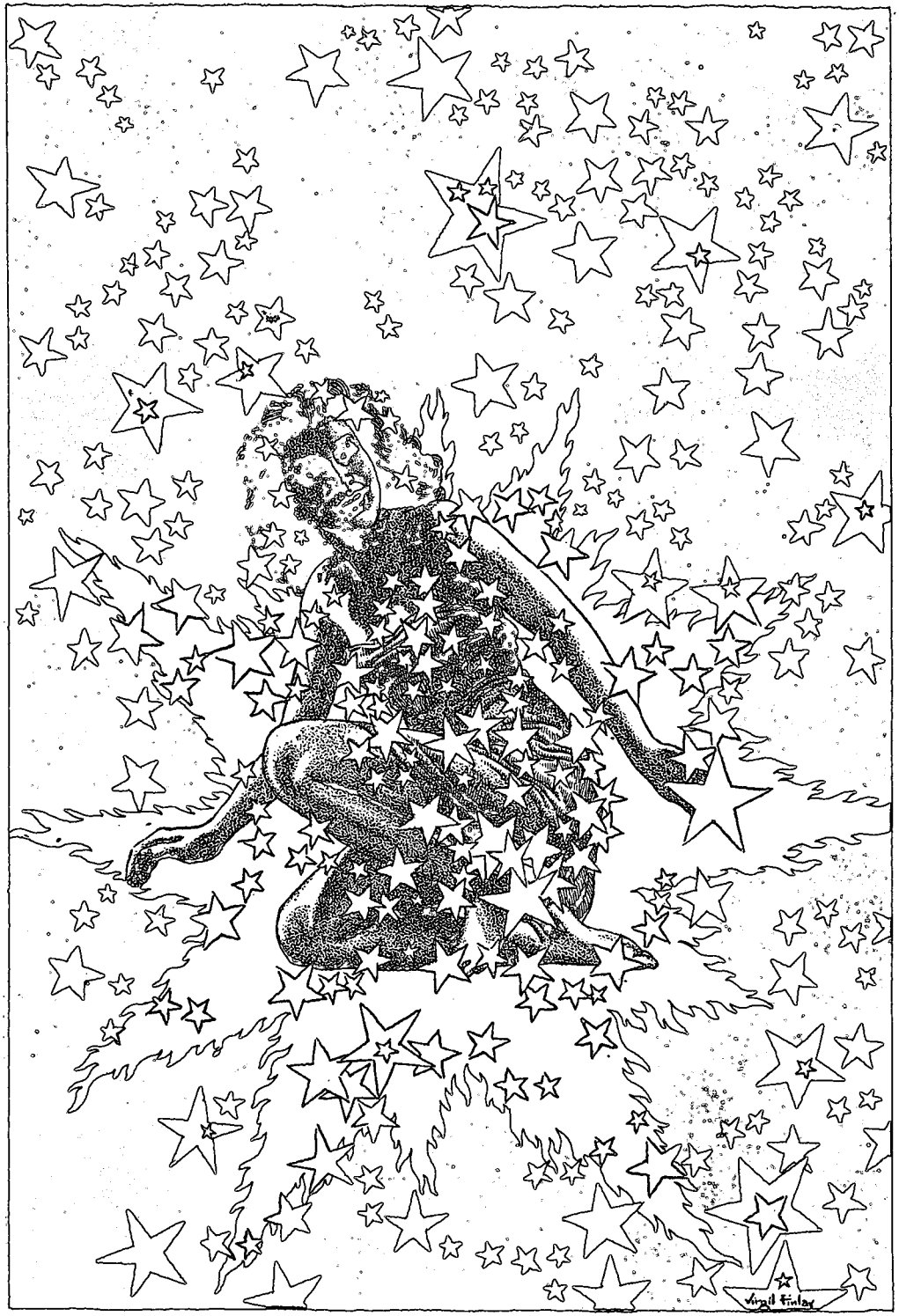

A voice had called to her that human ears had never heard

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AND so it happened that Lila, as fresh and pretty as a daisy, and greener than grass, was going out to some god-forsaken clearing in the Congo forest to teach a village or two of blacks the conventional use of cotton prints. She would not be utterly without protection, it is true. But what is one white man, whose profession forbids him to carry firearms, against a regiment of unregenerate savages who know how to brew a very potent beer?

Little Tom was shocked, but held his tongue. Big Tom, presuming on the privileges of middle age, gave utterance to his thoughts.

"But my dear child," he expostulated, "have you the faintest conception of what you are running into? Whoever sent you out on this fools' errand ought to be lynched. But leave that aside. Have you thought of the sleeping sickness? Have you—"

"You had better be looking after your precious junk," Little Tom interrupted with a triumphant grin. "I just saw Swain sneak into your cabin."

Big Tom departed without a word of farewell.

"Big Tom has sleeping sickness on the brain," Little Tom explained. "Don't mind what he says."

"I won't," she promised, with a glance of utter confidence. The little wretch knew how to flirt, Tom Junior reflected, and the discovery filled him with soul-satisfying peace. The success of the voyage was assured.

Swain's uninvited visit to Big Tom's cabin brought the hostility between the two men to a head. When he reached the door and peered in, Big Tom saw the invalid clumsily trying to get the X-ray tube working. For a few seconds the owner looked on in silence, while Swain, ignorant that he was observed, fussed and fiddled awkwardly with the apparatus. Big Tom soon reached the limit of his endurance.

"Monkey see, monkey do," he remarked with grim good humor.

Swain glanced back over his shoulder and snarled. For an instant his expression was that of an escaped ape caught in the act of rifling his master's sideboard. Big Tom was on him in two strides. With something between a yelp and a curse Swain bolted for the opposite door. His blundering hand had just turned the knob when Big Tom's foot helped him through and sent him sprawling on the deck. Swain got up, mad with rage. His lips curled back, baring the strong, white teeth, and his powerful body balanced lightly on the muscular legs, aiming for a spring at Blake's throat. Big Tom watched, fascinated. He was too astonished to defend himself. The man was nine-tenths animal.

Colton's shout saved the day. The doctor had seen the last of the fracas from his nook behind a ventilator. Like a dog coming to heel at the sound of its master's voice, Swain snapped back into a human being. The same flash of amazed wonder passed over his face as had transformed it when he was saved by a hair from assaulting the fruit peddler, and with a despairing groan the wretched man turned and walked rapidly aft to his own cabin. He did not reappear for three days. His food, an inordinate allowance of fresh fruit, was taken to him once a day by the puzzled deck steward.

When, on the fourth day out, he emerged to get some fresh air, his friends ignored the incident, and treated him like an ordinary human being. Except for his persistent, irritating cross questioning of Big Tom on all manner of scientific topics, and occasional violent fits of trembling, he was unobjectionable enough. Colton watched him incessantly. He was beginning to understand the case. A little more frankness on Swain's part would have given him the key to the riddle which he was still to seek through desperate months of unwished adventure.

Tomorrow they would reach Matadai, and the journey up country would begin.

"IS YOUR friend ill?" Lila asked the doctor. It was the first time she had asked any of them an intimate question concerning their eccentric friend.

"Yes," Colton replied, "he is making rather a slow recovery from a bad nervous breakdown."

Lila said nothing for the moment, but gazed speculatively toward the door of Swain's cabin.

Swain had left the party talking by the rail to attend to his own business in his own cabin.

"Do you think he will get better?" she asked.

"No," Colton replied decisively. "You will be leaving us soon, so I can be frank. Poor Swain's is a hopeless fight. The odds are all against him. He lost his daughter out here, and his wife in Chicago. He will never be a normal man

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again. The shock of his wife's death was too much for him."

"You never told us that," Big Tom remarked. "Why did you keep us in the dark? Poor devil, I take a different view of his case now."

"I didn't tell you," Colton explained, "because the circumstances were too shocking. They were enough to unbalance any mind, let alone Swain's already tipped by his daughter's tragic death in the Congo. Some day I will tell you what I know, but not now. It could do no good."

"He began pestering us with questions," Big Tom resumed, "before we left Chicago. The hiss of the X-ray machine was always the signal for him to come lurching in like a drunken person. We let him stand around and watch so long as he kept quiet, but when he started on his questions we were forced to kick him out. You can't measure the diffraction pattern of a crystal with a pest asking you if the X-ray will destroy the brain cells."

"Yes," Colton agreed, "he has been after me, too. That lecture of Paget's on the artificial growth of tissue seems to have sent him off on some queer tangent. He is chock full of scraps of scientific theories that he has picked up from college text books and the current hairraisers. Somehow he has got it into his head that 'rays'—X-rays, alpha rays, or some mystical kind not yet discovered—can change the rate of growth of the human body.

"There is a crazy sort of logic about some of his ravings. For instance, he makes me admit that the ductless glands control growth, intelligence, and perhaps sex. Then he will point out that an injury or disease of certain other glands will totally change a human being's appearance, transforming him from a man into a hairy, sideshow freak. His next step is to drag in a little of your sensational physics. Is it not true, he asks, bombardments with alpha 'rays' have smashed the so-called atoms of thirteen of the commoner chemical elements—oxygen, and so forth? Of course I can't deny an accepted fact. Being neatly trapped I am powerless to defend myself from Swain's carefully loaded club.

"Put two and two together, he says, and you see how it should be possible, by spraying the human brain and other nerve centres with the proper 'rays' to decompose—transmute, if you like—the chemical elements composing the brain and nerves into new elements. Take iron, for instance, he will say, or phosphorus. Both are common in the human body. But suppose these elements were broken down, *in the body*, to sodium, or fluorine, or iodine, or helium. The breaking down need not be complete. Only a small fraction of the iron or whatnot would have to decompose into helium, say, to modify the chemistry of the body radically, unalterably.

"And, he goes on like a logical lunatic, the chemistry of the body being thus upset, it follows that the excretions of the ductless glands—all highly complex chemical substances in the most beautifully delicate balance—will run wild in a dozen new and unsuspected abnormalities. Our lunatic is now ready for his grand conclusion. Since the fluids excreted by the glands are largely responsible for man, body and mind, and since we have profoundly changed the chemical nature of those fluids, it must follow that man himself will be transformed into something not human. And all this 'sea change into something new and strange,' as Shakespeare would put it, is the direct result of spraying the brain and nerves with the right kind of rays.

"It is as crazy a theory and as logical a tissue of nonsense as was ever spun by any lunatic in a madhouse for reduced philosophers."

"Do you know what it reminds me of?" Little Tom asked with sly innocence.

"What?" the unsuspecting Colton asked.

"Sir Ambrose Paget's lecture. And," he went on, with a patronizing wave of the hand, "medicine is still in its infancy. It was only with Pasteur's work that it began to be a science. It follows then, as Swain is always saying, that whenever one of you medical fellows tries his hand at a theory, he gets himself all balled up like a cat in a knitting basket. Being in its infancy, medicine is bound to evolve infantile theories. It can't—"

But he did not finish. Colton pursued him round the deck and finally down to the lower regions. Left alone with the disputed peach, Big Tom became quite tender.

"So you know nothing about these Simpkinses to whom you are going?"

Lila confirmed his suspicions.

"They are just missionaries who have worked for the last fifteen years in Africa. They have been in the Congo district a little over six months, I believe. So naturally they find it rather strange and

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difficult at first. That is why they want me to help. Where they were before—Uganda—everything is lovely, quite civilized in fact."

"Then why did the fools leave it?" Big Tom demanded.

Lila gave him a reproving glance, not unmixed with admiration.

"Because they were called to a new and harder field."

"Called? You mean they were fired. Now look here, Lila. I don't like this business at all. If you were a red-nosed freak with mouse-colored hair and pimples, I would say, 'Go into the forests of the Congo and convert the blacks, and God bless you.' I would even advise you to get the sleeping sickness before applying for leave to visit your dump in the Middle West after five years' faithful service in the swamps. But let me be frank, Lila."

"Yes?" she encouraged softly.

"Just this. You are too nice a girl, and far too pretty a nice girl, to be wasting your fragrance on the desert air."

"But I am not going to the desert, Big Tom," she objected simply.

"Hang it! You know what I mean," he blurted out. "What does it matter if I do hash my metaphors in trying to say it? You should get married."

"Should I? Why?"

"Oh, damn it all, how do I know, if you don't?"

"Mr. Blake!"

"I beg your pardon, Lila. I'm too old, I suppose. But for all that, what *I* said stands good. You should get married."

"Did it never strike you that a girl might feel she owes a duty to the world?"

"A duty? Teaching savages who don't *want* to know the A. B. C. and who would have no use for it if they did? Bah! Your 'mission,' if you have any, is to have a good time yourself and help someone else to share your fun."

"I am not a hedonist, Mr. Blake," she said stiffly.

"Good Lord, what's that? It sounds awful. Has it anything to do with futurism?"

IN spite of herself she laughed. She saw that Big Tom was merely trying to develop her sense of humor and her feeling for proportion.

"But honestly," she said, "I do feel that I am fitted to help these people. And why shouldn't I?"

"Do you really want me to tell you? Very well then, I shall. My friend Colton has taught me quite a little about modern psychology. It is all very interesting, and helps me no end in understanding the people I meet. There is a very common human trait—I won't call it a failing—to which psychologists have given the name 'substitution.' It is a very simple process. When we wish to do something of which we are a little bit ashamed because we imagine it mean, or selfish, or undignified, we scratch around for some perfectly respectable disguise to cover up our real motives. The true motive, the mean, selfish drive behind our actions, is paraded forth in solemn black clothes that deceive even ourselves as to what is underneath. As they say, we substitute for the true motive a fake one which will enable us to keep our sham self-respect.

"To give you an example from my own life: when I was a young fellow, just starting out in science as Little Tom is now, I told myself that I was going into scientific research because it was the one sure way of benefiting the human race with what brains I had. But science makes a man look at things in cold blood. I soon realized that my true reason for doing research was the personal pleasure I derived from my work. And I admitted—to myself only, of course, for it doesn't do to smash popular idols in the public market place—that *I* would continue to plug away at research for just so long as I got a kick out of it, whether or not humanity was advanced a cent's worth.

"At first this was rather a shock. My vanity suffered. It had been so much nicer, giving me a sort of puffed-up feeling like a pouter pigeon, to think that I was sacrificing my life for the good of the race, while more selfish men were piling up fortunes and having a good time. But after I got used to the truth, I liked it much better than the sham. I thought what fools those other fellows were to miss all the fun I was having.

"So much for my own case. Now for yours. You are adventurous and ache to see the world. But you can't confess to a low love of excitement and keep your self-respect. So you substitute for the real drive to your life a fake desire to help the heathen. As a matter of fact you would be twice as happy as you are if you only had the nerve to face the unflattering truth and see yourself as you are. It will hurt at first. But in the end absolute honesty with yourself will double your enjoyment. You may even

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become a very good hedonist in time."

"But I don't want to!" she protested, half crying.

"Oh, yes, you do, my dear. We all do, whether we call it that or not. The martyr who spends his life strapped to the business side of an iron harrow is no less of a hedonist than the fellow who dissipates ten million on expensive high life. The martyr gets his pleasure out of thinking how miserable he is, and how miserable the morbid crowd thinks he is, while the Johnny gets his kick out of making all the girls happy. Just think it over."

"I shall," she promised shamefacedly. "But even if what you say is true, how can I go about to see the world? I have no money beyond what I earn."

Big Tom burst into a roar of laughter.

"You don't need to think it over. You have admitted everything. Now don't you feel better?"

"I think you're horrid," she pouted.

"Sorry I can't say the same about you," he sighed.

"Hadn't you better be seeing what Little Tom and the doctor are doing? I saw them going into your cabin a few minutes ago when," she concluded maliciously, "you were lecturing. Mr. Swain hasn't been about all day."

Blake hastily rose and hurried to his cabin. Within, he found Little Tom and Colton questioning Swain.

"What were you trying to do, anyway?" Colton asked.

Swain maintained an obstinate silence. His face bore a stupid filmed look, as if he had been drinking.

"It's no use asking him," Little Tom remarked. "He's drunk. Turn him out to take the air."

Colton explained what had happened. Hearing the hissing crackle of the X-ray tube, they had entered Blake's cabin and found Swain with the apparatus going at full blast. He was stooped over, with his head under the tube, so that the impinging pencil of rays focussed on the back of his skull at the base of the brain.

"He's crazy," Big Tom remarked contemptuously. "A hell of a fine guide he'll make. Why don't you ditch him at Matadai?"

"Because," Colton answered slowly, "his case is as interesting to me as the sleeping sickness is to you, Big Tom. I have about made up my mind," he continued, "to let you gather the statistics while I gather honey. Swain's problem is unique."

"That's obvious," Big Tom rejoined dryly. "He ought to be in a circus with Jo Jo and the other dogfaced boys. The nearer we get to the Congo the more like an ape he looks. It is almost impossible to believe that he was ever an educated man, and a physician at that."

"I shouldn't be surprised to learn some day that he was trained as a physicist," Colton retorted. He took his profession very seriously and resented any slur on its sanctity.

The next morning they woke as the mailboat docked at Matadai. They did not stay long in that little port of white warehouses and green, rolling hills that swathed the river in their folds. By noon they were off in the train, and past the long rapids to Leopoldville, where Colton's work was to begin. Lila accompanied them, for it was in Leopoldville that she was to meet the Simpkinses. From there she was to be snatched into the forest, miles away to the forsaken clearings where the white man is only less of a curiosity than his calico.

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CHAPTER III

HIS PEOPLE

AT Leopoldville the party met an unforeseen check. The three men of course offered to see Lila safely handed over to her new friends, and accompanied her to the office of the station agent, expecting to meet the Simpkinses there. The agent had been notified of Colton's purpose in visiting the Congo, and ordered to help the doctor in every way possible, with supplies, "boys" and transport. But he had not been forewarned of Miss Meredith's invasion. Consequently he looked a little blank when Colton introduced her.

"Your secretary?" he inquired.

Colton explained. The expression of polite interest on the agent's face changed to one of pained concern when the Simpkinses were mentioned.

"You will pardon me a moment," he said, with a significant glance at Colton, "but I must consult my records to find the exact address of your friends, Miss Meredith."

Colton guessed, and so did Big Tom. During the agent's absence they tried their best to prepare her for what they knew was coming. The agent had expected as much of Colton.

"You are not very keen on this job, are you, Lila?" Colton asked. "Why not reconsider before it is too late, and go back to the States? Get a decent position in a civilized country. There's not much to see here. You saw how monotonous it was coming up in the train. Just a dirty river and a steaming forest—that's all there is to it."

"And the natives," Big Tom seconded, "are not really companionable."

"What's the matter?" she asked in alarm. "Why are you trying to scare me off?"

They had no chance to explain, for just then the agent returned, looking grave.

"You did not get the cablegram the Mission headquarters sent you?" he began.

"No. When was it sent?"

"Four weeks ago yesterday."

"I left home five weeks ago."

"The Mission will doubtless pay your passage back, Miss Meredith," he hurried on. "I am sorry to have to tell you that your services will not be needed."

"But why?"

"The cablegram would have explained," he replied vaguely. "The Simpkinses were relatives of yours, or perhaps friends?"

"I never heard of them in my life until I got the offer of this position."

"Then I can tell you everything," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Simpkins were so ill four weeks ago that they thought you had better not come. They died ten days ago."

"Sleeping sickness?" Big Tom asked.

The agent nodded. "They were in one of the worst districts. Now, Miss Meredith, won't you take the next train back to Matadai? I can telegraph ahead and get a berth reserved for you on the steamer. You need not worry about the money; I'll settle with the Mission."

"It is all so sudden," she said faintly. "Give me a few moments to think."

She retired to a corner of the room and sat silent, while the men tried to appear natural. Presently the agent drew Colton aside.

"Your friend Swain," he whispered, "is an old timer in these parts. Know anything about him?"

"A little," the doctor admitted guardedly. "Do you?"

"A lot," the agent replied with a curious laugh. "Is he one of your party?"

"Unofficially. I have engaged him as my guide. He says he knows the country from A to Z."

"He does. You had better give him the slip this evening and come to my house for dinner. The others are invited too, of course, but I draw the line at Swain."

"It seems rather a scurvy trick," the doctor demurred. "Swain is my patient."

"He is also your guide," the agent added significantly. "Better accept my invitation."

"Thanks, I will. Well, Miss Meredith seems to have made up her mind. What is it to be, Lila?"

"I am not going back."

"No? Then what do you propose to do? You can't live on the scenery."

"I might open a school for the white children," she began slowly, "but I shan't. I've had enough teaching. That five minutes of thinking did me more good than any five years I've spent on earth."

"So you found out that you don't like teaching?" Big Tom commented with approval. "I knew it the minute I saw you. Still, like Colton, I'm curious to know how you are going to make a living. Why not get married?"

"Because I haven't been asked, for one

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thing," she replied. "No, I shall be a secretary."

"To whom?" Little Tom inquired.

"Dr. Colton. I can get out his reports and statistics in good shape. I'm quick at figures, and a fair stenographer."

"Well, of all the nerve—" Colton began, but she quickly stopped him.

"Please think it over," she begged. "I simply can't go back to that awful town. Everybody would laugh at me. I'll work for ten dollars a month and my board."

"But we are going into the most outlandish places—forests and swamps and jungles where no white woman and very few white men, if any, have ever set foot. I even feel conscience stricken about dragging the Blakes along with me, and they're old friends and strong, capable men."

"I give in. I really need someone," Colton said, "as I'm an awful dub on the typewriter."

Lila thanked him with her eyes. Little Tom regretted that he needed no secretary. His father, older in the ways of the world, rose to his opportunity.

"I'll give you another ten a month if you keep my scientific apparatus clean and in good shape. It is likely to get pretty filthy in these sweaty forests, to say nothing of that muddy ditch."

Lila's thanks were cut short by Colton's indignation.

"Do you mean to say you are going to drag all that junk through the jungle? I thought we had talked you out of it a week ago."

"I'll leave it here if you can suggest some more exciting way of killing time in the villages while you are off counting corpses. You can't? Well, then, my outfit goes. So that's that."

THAT evening Colton dined alone with the agent. Swain disappeared early in the afternoon "to see some friends." The two Toms, feeling that they had been invited merely out of politeness, made the excuse of wishing to see as much of the town as possible during their short stay. They took Lila with them to the only decent hotel in the place, run by a Frenchman, and spent a very cosy evening.

The agent at first was not inclined to be talkative. He waited for Colton to give him a lead. The doctor, for his part, was a trifle reticent about betraying anything that might compromise a patient. So progress was slow. At last, with the coffee, the agent decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Swain, you say, is a patient of yours?"

"More or less. He does not consider himself so, but I treat him as one. He did consult me once, however."

"About himself?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I thought it might have been about his wife. She was perfectly well when she left the Congo, but one can never tell what fever germs will wake up when we get away from this infernal hole."

"You are interested in medicine?" the doctor parried.

"Who isn't in this swamp? We have to keep awake. But I'm only an amateur, and a very superficial one at that. Still, I suspected that Mrs. Swain might not last long after she got away. Do you happen to know what she died of?"

"She never consulted me, so I can't say. I saw the body."

"And you formed no opinion?"

"Not at the time. Later I thought over what I had seen, and made a very rough guess."

"Care to say what it was?"

"Not directly. I can say this much, without betraying a confidence. Swain for some time, both before and after his wife's death, was under a severe mental strain. I do not know yet what caused his condition. Do the natives here use drugs to any extent?"

"They chew leaves and bark of various kinds—at least the low-down blacks indulge. Also they drink a good deal, palm wine, native beer, and the like. So you think Swain may have fallen into bad habits?"

"I'm not sure. What sort of a reputation did he have out here?"

"Pretty bad. In fact it couldn't have been worse. There was never anything very tangible to fix on him, though the black mark was quite generally recognized." The agent paused. "Try one of these cigars? They kick like a wounded bull elephant. Nothing like them for settling the digestion."

When their cigars were lit, the agent got up and began slowly pacing back and forth.

"I'm going to tell you what I know of Swain," he resumed, "for your protection. As agent here I feel that I must, even at the risk of blackening another man's character. In a way I am responsible for your safety as long as you stay in the Congo, so I am within my rights

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in warning you. Swain is an out and out rotter."

"Criminal?"

"Worse. He has no conception of the difference between right and wrong. I used to talk with him by the hour. His utter failure to show indignation or disgust at the most revolting native atrocities marked him as a man without the first notions of civilized decency. He is incapable, I believe, of any emotion. As a medical missionary he did his work well enough, but always it was just part of his bread-and-butter job, never with the least spark of human sympathy. Naturally I became interested in trying to learn why he ever entered the profession, so I quizzed him.

"His answer was illuminating. I didn't get it all out of him at once. In fact it took me the better part of three years to strike the bottom of his character. I must go back and tell you something of his life.

"Swain was born in Nebraska, the son of an evangelist of the old school. The only books allowed about the house were tracts and other literature of a similar kind used by the father in his work. At about the age of fifteen, while in high school, young Swain first heard of science. There was a course of botany, and another in elementary biology, both of which Swain devoured. For the first time in his life he heard of Charles Darwin and of evolution. The theory made a deep impression on his adolescent mind, and he talked constantly of it at home.

"His father was shocked. He argued with the boy, and always got the worst of it, because his own education was limited, to say the least. His knowledge of science seems to have been nil. Failing to get the better of his son, he attacked the school, and succeeded in getting the teaching of science abolished. Then, according to Swain junior, the miracle happened. He was just a few days over sixteen when he was converted at a camp meeting conducted by his father. The father's joy can be imagined. His zeal had been rewarded beyond his hopes.

"But the mischief was done. Young Swain had read all of Darwin, and had digested, more or less, what he read. It was impossible to get it out of his system. He was in a bad fix. His sixteen-year-old brain had to hold the theory of evolution and his father's teachings without bursting. But, as I said, the miracle had happened.

"TO HIS father's tearful joy the son announced his intention of disproving the theory of evolution and confounding Darwin and all his followers. At first he conceived the idea of abolishing science by oratory. The boy preacher was a success for exactly three months. Then the public—it was in New York—began to laugh openly, and the press finished him in a series of cruel cartoons. Nebraska welcomed him home and soothed his lacerated vanity with a monster mass meeting in his honor.

"He was not deceived by all this local fame. The lesson of New York had gone home. To smash science he must first master a few tricks of the scientific game. Here his father came to his rescue. Why not study medicine and see with his own eyes the facts to refute Darwin's wool-gatherings about monkey-made men? The idea fired the boy's imagination. He would become a medical missionary and slay a whole academy of monkeys with a single syllogism. As a medical student he would learn comparative anatomy; as a medical missionary to Africa he would see men and monkeys in action together and, by a skilful application of his medical lore, demonstrate once and for all the ludicrous absurdity of evolution.

For a boy of sixteen you must admit it was no mean ambition. His home town in Nebraska gladly subscribed the necessary funds to pay for the medical education. It was money well spent, in a way. If you care to look up the records of the medical college you will find that Swain graduated at the top of his class."

"That is the inconceivable part of it," Colton remarked. "I took the trouble, before leaving Chicago, to find out what I could about Swain. His year at the medical college is one of the best in its history. Robertson, Bancroft, H. S. Smith, Tyson, and a dozen less eminent men, but still first raters, were all of that crop. Yet Swain beat the lot. It seems impossible now that Swain could ever have had a mentality that showed up in such a list. Sickness or something else must have played the devil with his mind."

"It was the 'something else,' I suspect," the agent resumed dryly. "Well, Swain had his medical degree, and a good one. There was no difficulty about getting him a post in Africa. He could have had the best on the continent. Instead he chose an obscure station out here in the Congo. Before leaving the States he was mar-

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ried. His bride came out with him, and followed him without a complaint into the foulest corners of this godforsaken country. Their daughter was born in a filthy native hut three hundred miles from the nearest white settlement.

"Swain never spent more than a few months in any one place. Every move he made took him deeper and deeper into the forest. I suspect that many of his expeditions had little to do with healing the sick. He acknowledged as much. His heart was with the monkeys, not with men. For weeks and months he almost lived with apes, baboons, monkeys and chimpanzees in their native forests.

"Six years ago he claimed, justly I believe, to know more about the life and habits of monkeys in general than any man living or dead. His family did not always accompany him on these queer expeditions, especially when his daughter was a mere child. But as she grew up—from about the age of fifteen on—the whole family would disappear into the forest for weeks. Swain sacrificed his wife and daughter, no less than himself, to his fantastic mania for disproving evolution.

"Now I come to the part which earned Swain the contempt of every white man in the Congo. Not content with mastering a score of native dialects, Swain actually joined four of the lowest tribes. He did this, he said, in order to get closer to the black man's soul.

"If reports told the truth, Swain got about as close to his black brothers' souls as it is possible for a human being to get, black or white. It is said that for a considerable time he became a witch doctor. You know the sort of thing I mean; the low down native fakir who prances about, covered with dog's blood and chicken brains, pretending to smell out witches and others evil doers."

"Have you any idea of his motive?"

"I can't say that I have. Although Swain is a monomaniac on evolution he is not crazy enough to believe in African magic. The agents up the river said it was all a commercial scheme. They may have been right. It is certain that Swain made quite a lot of money out of the ivory and pelts he collected as fees for his witch doctoring."

"Did he give up his regular medical work?"

"Yes, he cut loose from the Mission about six years before he retired on the

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proceeds from his new profession. The new beat the old out of sight as a money maker."

"What about his character?"

"Haven't I given you a hint? Out here we don't think much of a man who goes as low as the lowest natives. But, if that is not enough, I can tell you that he was kicked out of all four tribes which had taken him in. He was too dishonest for even the credulous black mind to stomach."

"And his wife?"

"She stuck to him through it all. Why? Because she thought he was a knight errant from Heaven to upset evolution."

"What became of the daughter?" Colton asked quietly. He remembered Swain's agonized confession that his daughter had died in the Congo, and the intended inference that she had suffered from the same disease as her mother.

"I never saw Edith Swain," the agent replied. "But by common report she was a beautiful thing when young. At about the age of eighteen she began to lose her good looks. All accounts agree on this. From a vivacious, intelligent girl she changed into a morose, brooding, almost sexless lump of flesh. Her father, in an effort to reawaken her interest in life, took her with him on one of his wildest expeditions into the forest. She had always loved the butterflies and insect life of the real wilderness.

"So it was natural that Swain should think of a long stay in the forest as a probable cure for his daughter's sickness. They left Mrs. Swain in one of the filthy native villages and entered the wildest part of the forest with three native guides. Four weeks later Swain emerged, alone. The guides, he said, had been bitten and killed by horned vipers. Edith met her death while attempting to swim a treacherous rapid. I never believed either assertion."

Colton started. "You think he did away with her, and shot the guides to keep their mouths shut?"

"That is farther than I care to go. It is a pretty serious thing to accuse a man of killing his own daughter."

"I believe you are mistaken," Colton said slowly. He was thinking of Swain's wife. Surely the man who had cherished that poor creature to the end would not have treated his daughter otherwise, however repulsive her affliction. "No: Swain is innocent on that count. I can't tell you my reasons for believing what I say, but they are pretty good. We shall learn everything in time. What made you think that Mrs. Swain would not last long after she left the Congo?"

"It was just a guess. I may have been wrong, if what you say about Swain should turn out to be true. Before she left she was beginning to look like the descriptions of her daughter. All her spirit seemed to have died. She was beautiful when I first knew her. When she took the steamer she was gross, unintelligent, sensual—in fact half-way toward the beasts. The Congo had got her at last."

"One thing is certain," Colton said, after a long silence. "Your suspicion about the daughter is not borne out by what happened to the mother. Swain was miles away when she died. It was an accident. I saw it with my own eyes."

"What sort of an accident?"

"She was run down in the park."

Colton, with intent to deceive, had told the truth. It all depended upon how one interpreted the words "run down." The agent pictured an automobile tragedy, as Colton intended he should. The doctor felt that the agent was getting too hot on the trail. A little hotter and he would have Swain arrested for murder. That wouldn't do at all. Colton wished to study Swain thoroughly before seeing the last of him.

"I'm very grateful," he said, as he rose to say good night, "for all your pointers. I shall keep a sharp eye out on friend Swain."

He walked to the hotel, where he sat up till daylight, thinking.

SIX months of routine work along the fever stricken banks of the great river, with Leopoldville and Kinshassa as his headquarters, had given Colton two-thirds of the information he required for his report. There had been numerous expeditions into the sparsely settled hinterland, or up the river to the last outlying ports of the white traders, but on the whole six months passed in one monotonous grind of tabulating and checking the reports which accumulated in bales in the main office. In all this work Lila was a real help.

After the third excursion into the rotting forests, Big Tom decided that a clean room with matting on the floor was preferable to an ant-infested litter of decaying vegetation three feet deep. The

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gloomy silences where, literally, the sun never penetrated might be an insects' paradise, but they were unspeakably depressing to a white man with nerves. Big Tom settled down to an endless X-ray analysis of the fascinating mineral specimens which the Kinshassa agent kindly placed at his disposal.

"Finding anything interesting?" Colton queried.

Big Tom held up a small splinter of metal, crisscrossed by a flat, crystalline pattern. "You recognize what it is, of course."

The doctor nodded. "A piece of meteoric iron, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is almost chemically pure iron. The structure is normal, and the X-ray pattern of one of its salts which I made shows it to be nothing but iron."

"That's what you would expect, isn't it?"

"Precisely. I should also expect its specific gravity to be practically the same as that of pure iron. But it isn't. This iron, bulk for bulk, is two and a half times as heavy as common, pure iron."

Colton looked incredulous. "Better let me take your temperature," he advised.

"The heat has nothing to do with it. Here, check up for yourself."

In half an hour Colton had performed the simple weighing and measuring necessary to verify Blake's statement.

"Well I'm jiggered," he observed, rising. "There is no doubt about it. A snake with a dog's head would be less of a freak of nature. Where did you get the specimen?"

"The agent lent it to me with the rest. He says that it was brought in some years ago by McKay, one of the government geologists at the time. This man, it seems, found a fragment of a meteor half buried in the forest about five hundred miles northeast of here. He chipped off this splinter. I would give a good deal to see the rest of the chunk. McKay disappeared about six years ago, so there is no hope of anything from him. He is supposed to have met his death in the pygmy country. In addition to his geology he seems to have been quite an explorer. Too bad he's dead."

"How do you explain the weight?"

"I don't," Big Tom replied. "Still, there is one rational guess. This is an isotope of terrestrial iron."

Colton shook his head. "You've got me."

"The idea is quite simple. Aston and others have found that what we thought were chemical elements a few years ago —lead, oxygen, gold, and so on—are not simple substances at all, but very close mixtures of several different things. Each element in the mixture has chemical properties identical with those of the whole mixture, but the atomic weights of the several constituents are different. For instance, mercury is made up of about half a dozen distinct elements, all having exactly the same chemical properties. But a gallon of one constituent would weigh more than a gallon of another.

"Now this iron," he continued, "probably bears a similar relation to common iron found on earth. It was made under very different conditions, perhaps in a much hotter and denser star than our sun. But even at that it's a freak. There is no other case known I believe, where the weight, bulk for bulk, of one variety of an element is two and a half times that of another variety."

"I don't blame you for sticking in your room rather than going out to make a Roman holiday for the ants."

A board creaked. They turned sharply to find Swain glaring at them like an enraged beast. In the shock of their surprise neither man spoke. Swain broke the silence.

"That belongs to me," he snarled, pointing at the splinter of meteoric iron in Blake's hand.

"How long have you been eavesdropping?" Big Tom asked with deliberate insolence. He had never overcome his intense dislike for the man.

SWAIN took a step forward. His features lapsed into the brutal mask that had stared down into the empty trunk in his Chicago flat. Colton stood watching Swain's face with a cold, fascinated attention. To him the situation was an extremely interesting medical problem, not an act in a human tragedy. Blake grasped a spanner.

"Come to your senses," he said sharply, "or I'll rap you over the head with this."

For a second it seemed as if Swain was about to spring. Then instantly the mask changed. A spasm of amazed pain, like the wondering terror of a soul awakening in hell, shot across his face, the muscles relaxed, and his features became those of a human being.

"I beg your pardon for entering without knocking," he mumbled. "I came to

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see if you would let me use the X-ray machine for a few minutes."

Blake was about to make a curt refusal when a glance from Colton stopped him.

"All right," he said. "Go ahead; help yourself."

"Thank you, I don't need it now." His eyes were riveted on the splinter of iron in Blake's hand.

"That seems to interest you," Colton remarked, nodding at the iron. "Ever see it before?"

Swain stumbled into a chair, hunched over the table, and broke into a horrible sobbing. The two men looked on in helpless shame. No man should see another give way to his feelings. To Colton it was a new aspect of the case, to Blake, a disgusting and maudlin exhibition of bad taste. The doctor began to think he had been mistaken about his patient. This man after all was capable of emotion. So Colton thought, but the truth, as he learned later, was much less simple. One does not attribute emotions to a whiskey soak or a drug fiend in the weeping stage.

At last Big Tom could stand it no longer.

"Pull yourself together, man, and sit up! Don't go all to pieces over nothing."

Swain choked, stopped his horrible noises, and faced Colton.

"The last time I saw that iron," he gulped, "was the day my daughter died."

Big Tom felt contrite, and looked it. The doctor, remembering what the agent had told him, merely waited.

"You were prospecting?" he suggested, knowing perfectly that Swain had been doing nothing of the kind.

"No," he answered vaguely.

"Then what the devil were you doing?" Big Tom snapped, again irritated by his natural enemy's meekness.

"I was running away," Swain replied with an idiotic leer, half conceit, half pleasure in the mystification he was producing.

Colton decided to put two and two together and observe the effect.

"By the way, Swain," he began, "the agent at Leopoldville told me the night we arrived that you did not get on very well with several of the black tribes. As I recall it now he mentioned exactly four tribes with whom you had a falling out. Was it from one of these that you were running away the day your daughter died? She was drowned, was she not?"

Swain's answer was a snarl.

"They still lie. Why should I tell you the truth? You would not believe it."

"I have believed stranger things than the truth," Colton assured him with a laugh. "As to why you should tell us anything, that's another matter. Let me tell you something first. Then if you want to swap secrets it's up to you." Colton's knowledge of Swain's psychology had taught him how to unlock the twisted man's confidence. Flattery and an appeal to vanity are the proper keys to the primitive or degenerated mind. Swain's mentality was now about halfway between the two. It is perhaps doubtful if it ever had been higher on the scale. An apelike imitativeness and a parrot's aptitude in repeating other men's ideas would readily account for his record at college and his less reputable adventures in education.

"That piece of iron in Blake's hand," Colton resumed, "is probably the most extraordinary piece of iron on earth. It is two and a half times as heavy as any other piece of iron the same size. So if you are the man who found it originally you made an interesting scientific discovery. There is no telling what may come out of this find."

"Yes," Blake concurred, "smaller things, less startling finds than this one, have changed the world's history. If you care to say how and where it came into your hands the whole scientific public would like to hear you."

"The scientific public?" Swain repeated, in a voice shaken and hoarse with hatred. "The servants of the devil!"

His face had taken on the bestial look, the heavy intolerance of the brainless fanatic, but only for a moment.

"Perhaps you are right," Colton agreed. "You yourself once served the devil indirectly. Medicine is a science, in spite of what my friend Blake thinks of it. And remember this; to destroy the works of the devil we must first understand them. You admit that? Evolution is an example."

Colton was not slow to note the flash of insane conceit on Swain's face. He had flicked him on the raw.

"So if you tell us about this piece of iron," he continued, with just that subtle lack of logic which would convince a mind like Swain's, "you would be helping us to understand it, and our enemies to destroy us. Don't you see the point?"

The fanatic did, clearly, chiefly because there was no point to see. Only an imbecile wastes reason on an idiot. Logic,

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after all, has its uses in an insane universe. Swain became craftily confidential. His story somehow sounded plausible; but it did not ring true.

"I gave that piece of iron to a white man in the forest."

"That scarcely agrees with what the present owner told me," Big Tom objected. "According to him this was *found* by a geologist."

"He thought he found it," Swain sneered. "But he would never have seen it if it hadn't been for me. I was hiding behind a lump of black rock when he mistook me for an animal, or a savage. My hair must have showed above the rock. He shot. The bullet chipped off that piece of iron."

"And you escaped?"

"Not even a native can track me in the woods," he answered conceitedly, "when I want to disappear."

COLTON thought it was time for some shooting on his own account.

"You must be almost as clever as that fellow who got away from the policeman in Jackson Park," he remarked dryly.

Swain's only answer was a dumb look of stupidity and hatred. Colton felt that he had solved the Jackson Park mystery. But the knowledge only made him keener to get to the bottom of the whole business.

"You said you were running away," he prompted, "when the geologist mistook you for an ape?"

Swain had had enough for one day.

"My daughter was drowned that day, as I have told you. It is painful for me to recall the circumstances."

Drawing the rags of his dignity about him he lurched from the room.

"Queer fish," Colton laughed.

"As crazy as a loon," Big Tom agreed. "I wonder how much time he has spent spying on me? It was no accident that brought him in just now."

"Your apparatus seems to fascinate him. I shouldn't be surprised if he plays the peeping Tom every hour he's in the settlement. By the way, I wonder what he has been up to these last six weeks? We have seen precious little of him."

"I have wondered, too. That fellow needs a shadow. What sort of a guide did he make on your trips?"

"First rate. Couldn't have been better. He knows this country like a book. And his command of the native dialects is astonishing."

"Well, we can remember that before we hang him, and give him a soft collar. I hate the sight of him."

"Rot!" Colton laughed. "You couldn't hate anyone."

"I could come pretty close to the real thing in his case. Don't you get a crawly, uneasy feeling every time he comes near you?"

"Not particularly. There are lots like him in the insane asylums. They never make the doctors' hair stand on end."

"No, because they are safely locked up. But this beauty is roaming the forest at large. And you saw how easily he sneaked in here when we weren't looking. Hereafter I work with my face to the door. Then he can't get the drop on me. There's no window behind my back, thank Heaven."

Colton had to hurry away to inspect Lila's typing. A few minutes later, Little Tom sauntered in, proudly exhibiting a new home-made butterfly net. While his father pottered with minerals, Little Tom pursued the lazy, elusive butterflies. His collection now numbered some five hundred gorgeous specimens, all neatly mounted on cork and properly labelled with the date and place of capture.

"Well, how goes it?" he inquired.

"So—so. There is no mistake about this iron. I sent off an account of it to the *Philosophical Magazine* by this morning's mail."

"Hope it makes you famous," Little Tom grinned His father's weakness was a morbid dislike of publicity.

"Run away, little boy, and catch some pretty butterflies. Don't bother papa just now; he's busy."

"You bet I'll run. Lila is coming out with me this afternoon. This is Saturday, you know."

Big Tom tried to look only casually interested.

"I believe I'll take a layoff myself," he he announced.

"Why don't you?" Little Tom encouraged, confident of his ability to lose his father in the first five yards of the forest. "It's awfully stuffy in here."

"Wait a minute, while I lock up, and I'll go with you."

Big Tom bustled about and put away his junk in record time. On the way to Lila's place he told Little Tom of Swain's visit.

"Suppose you keep an eye on him while you're chasing butterflies through these bramble thickets."

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"You poor old fathead," Little Tom rejoined affectionately, "did you think I have been collecting butterflies all these weeks?"

"What has he been up to? Of course I don't expect you to know what he has been doing on these mysterious trips of his into the jungles. But if you are as smart as you say you are, you ought to know in a general way what his little game is."

"If I knew the native languages I might have a theory. I have followed him like a shadow as closely as I dared, and as far as it was safe to go without a guide into the forests. He seems to be interested in just two things, the lowest scum of the natives and the animal life of the forests. You have heard all these signal drums booming?"

"The hollow log contraptions?"

"Yes, the native wireless. Well, so far as I can make out, Swain waits till the racket begins, and then hotfoots it through the tall timber to the source of disturbance. There have been no end of palavers at all the reeking native villages within a radius of fifteen miles during the past three months. And brother Swain seems to have been the main attraction.

The blacks, especially the women and warriors, go daffy over him. Their friendship is a little disgusting in some ways. These blacks have a different set of manners and morals from ours. Swain finds himself right at home wherever he goes. The things they eat would make a white man sick. Not all the time, of course, but just at these high feasts."

"You can't make out what it's all about?"

"As I said, I can't get the hang of this native lingo. Still, I have a theory."

"Let's hear it."

"Swain is crazy."

"Is that all? I knew that before we left Chicago."

"So did I. But I didn't know just how crazy. He thinks he's the Napoleon of the Congo, or I miss my guess."

"And he is trying to raise the blacks to wipe out the godless whites?"

"Not by a long shot. He plans the most spectacular campaign in the history of Africa. From what I have seen, I believe he is going to clean up the forests."

"And put the natives into pants and petticoats? It would be just like him."

"Wrong again. The blacks are his trusted allies. Swain is planning a drive against the monkeys, apes, gorillas, chimpanzees and the rest of his ancestors from here to the far east coast."

Big Tom hooted.

"Who's crazy now? You've been seeing things in the timber."

"You bet I have. I have seen Swain climb a tree faster than any monkey ever born. And I have watched him spying on the domestic affairs of the apes in the most curious way imaginable. That fellow has no manners."

"What about yourself?" his father laughed. "You seem to have been looking through the keyhole too."

"I always looked the other way. There is something so human about the apes and monkeys around here that I can't think of them as animals. I would as soon spy on Lila as on some of these poor beasts I have seen Swain gloating over. The longer he watches the more like an ape he becomes himself. His shoulders hunch up, his jaw shoots upward, and he squats on a branch, hanging on to another, just like an old orangoutang."

"But what about this Napoleonic campaign of his to purify the forests?"

"That may be his nutty notion, or it may not. He is just crazy enough to preach to the monkeys and try to convert them to wearing clothes."

"IT wouldn't be the first time in history," Big Tom chuckled, "that an enthusiast has tried to reform the beasts."

"Swain isn't trying to teach the baboons because he likes them. In fact he hates the whole outfit like poison. If you don't believe it, just follow him on one of his trips into the forest and watch his face. There's murder in his eye every time he sees one of them up in the trees. But it is the old fellows, with gray whiskers, who look like senators of Abe Lincoln's time, that make him really furious.

"Some of these old chaps are at least three-quarters human and as dignified as deacons. A dozen times I have seen Swain reach for a club or a brickbat when one of these old boys ambles by. But he always gets the better of his rage, and lets the old gentleman live. So you see where I got my theory. It wouldn't do to wreck the campaign by getting killed in a single-handed, private brawl with one of the elders. Napoleon is going to make the blacks do his dirty work."

"Hadn't we better tell Colton? A nut like Swain shouldn't be allowed to roam

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around without a keeper. He may start a serious row among the blacks before he's satisfied."

"I have told him already," Little Tom announced with a superior air.

"Smart Alec! Why didn't you tell me?"

"You never asked me how many butterflies I had caught. Colton did."

"And what did he say?"

"Nothing much. Merely remarked that if there is anything in it, he would expect about as much of Swain."

"I wonder why?" Big Tom muttered.

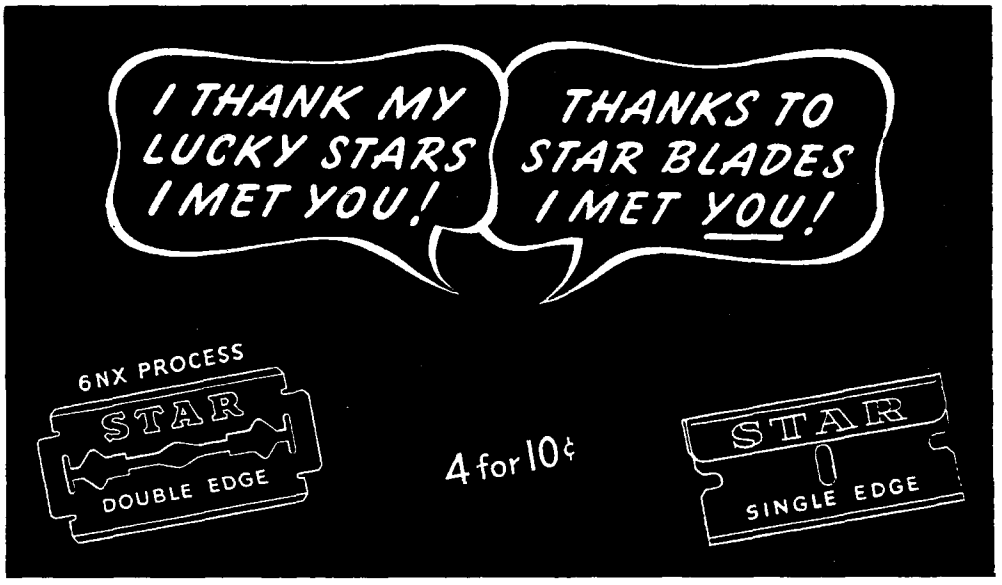
The reason for Colton's belief is obvious enough. Knowing what he did of Swain's mission in life he guessed that the unfortunate man's disorder would make him regard apes, monkeys and their cousins as children of the devil, deliberately let loose in the world by that gentleman to lead evolutionists astray. It would be a brilliant and satanic piece of strategy. The superficial analogies between men and monkeys could not fail to mislead the less intelligent of the two into all sorts of crazy theories. The chattering, eloquent congresses of the apes, their perpetual quarrels and their absurd self-respect were too devilishly human in the eyes of the scientists to be mere accidents.

Pedants among them might insist upon comparing the anatomy of men and monkeys, and even delving deep into obscure corners of embryology, but the great majority of the intellectuals would be immediately convinced of man's kinship to the apes by the diabolical similarities between the social ethics of the two races. This being so, how could Swain better execute his worthy mission than by wiping out en masse these luckless pawns of Satan's ingenuity?

It did not enter Colton's innocent mind that there might be another explanation, and a far more human one, for Swain's perverse zeal. The doctor was too simple, too honest to imagine this more probable alternative. Being by nature open and aboveboard in his dealings with men, he was incapable of imputing more than ordinary, decent evil to his fellow sinners. That a human being could be both a flaming torch of righteousness, of a sort, and a mean sneak, never occurred to Colton's unsophisticated innocence.

It may be that Swain, having seen the apes and lived with them in closer intimacy than has, perhaps, any other white man, became convinced of the truth of evolution. He was a physician, it must be remembered, with an excellent training originally, whatever an inherited tendency to degeneracy of the intellect may have made him ultimately. Possibly, then, being convinced that human evolution was not the infernal fraud that he had ignorantly imagined, but an elementary law of nature, Swain had determined to wipe out the most conclusive evidence in its favor.

And why? It would be difficult to say.



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The cynical answer would reply that Swain, being still in the boy orator stage of development, wished to perform some spectacular feat of ignorant prejudice for the greater glory of himself. A less harsh judgment would say that he was merely trying to save his vanity at the expense of his self-respect, a common and pardonable human expedient.

The kindest theory is that he was merely a stupid fanatic who wished at any cost to uphold his own pet delusion because, like all propagandists of absurdities, he honestly believed that what best suited his own narrow mind would be the one salvation of all mankind. On this theory he would gladly admit the truth—to himself—of the science which he had set out to demolish, but would nevertheless seek to destroy it by abolishing the evidence on which it was founded because, although human evolution appeared to him as an indisputable fact, it was a dangerous doctrine to put before the minds of the young.

The truth, he probably argued like hundreds of great leaders before him, must be upheld even at the cost of trampling it flat in the mire of superstition. The trick of bolstering up a paying fraud by suppressing the evidence against it is one of the best recognized and least disreputable means of stabilizing society. Swain was well within his human rights.

Finally there is a certain intriguing largeness about his grandiose project of setting back the clock a full hundred years that must engage our sympathetic respect. A man who could imagine himself competent to dam the floods of time can have been no mean paranoiac, but a potential statesman of extraordinary ability and forcefulness of character.

Swain was without doubt one of the greatest men of our century. It is merely his misfortune that his greatness puttered itself out in talk and fantastic crusades against windmills, instead of carrying him heavenward like a Fourth of July rocket to the firmament of popular fame.

"Shall we go gunning for him this afternoon?" Big Tom asked as they reached Lila's door.

"This is officially a butterfly expedition," Little Tom demurred. "Still, if the gods see fit to raise a hairy ape in my path I shall crown him with my little net."

This afternoon being the Saturday half holiday, Lila was Lila and not Miss Meredith. She emerged to greet her friends, clad in a sensible flannel shirt, knickers, leather gloves and military leggings. It is only common sense when entering the Congo forest to expose the minimum temptation to the ants, wild bees, bloodsuckers, thorn bushes and other delights that make the cool green twilight less like the interior of a cathedral than it might otherwise be. Her first brief excursion behind the green veil had robbed the mystery of its sentimental charm. Lila had packed an appetizing supper for two. Seeing Big Tom she hastily ducked into the kitchen and slapped together an extra ration.

"Whither away?" she asked, smiling. "Shall we chase butterflies or take the trail to that deserted village Dr. Colton wants us to see?"

"I'm for the village," Big Tom voted.

"Butterflies for me," Little Tom spoke up. "Lila, you must cast the deciding vote. It's a deuce of a predicament for a woman, I know, but you'll have to do it. As you can't agree with both of us you are bound to make one sore. I'll bet it's Big Tom."

LILA was saved by the booming of a native drum. The hollow *tum-tum-tum* seemed to originate not more than a mile away behind the dense green wall to their left.

"He's getting bolder," Little Tom observed. "The pow-wow must be in that clearing we saw the other day, Lila. Next time he will probably hold his reunion right here in the public market. Well, it seems to be settled in favor of butterflies. Come on, all. Big Tom carries the grub; I've got my net to manage."

Twenty minutes' march along a good trail over the rotting leaves took them through the depressing gloom of the first belt of forest to the hint of sunshine again.

"There's the clearing," Little Tom announced. "Do you see any butterflies?"

They crept closer, carefully avoiding twigs and tanglefoot, till they could see distinctly through a natural window in the green dungeon out to the dazzling sunlight of the clearing. A curious sight met their eyes. In the open space, surrounded by broad leaved bananas and bedraggled palms, they saw a silent double ring of blacks, men and women, seated on the litter of a hundred previous orgies.

The first unusual thing that struck their attention was the uncanny silence

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The sacrificial dance began in ominous silence

of that ring. From even their short experience they knew that the black man on a holiday is rather a noisy fellow, full of quips and cracks. Perhaps the beer had not yet arrived. The second thing, which riveted their eyes, was the focus of attention of all that silent ring. In its exact center a huge ape had been securely fastened to a stake by a tight rope collar around the neck. How they had ever succeeded in securing the brute was a mystery. Probably they had half-poisoned it in the forest with drugged bait before venturing to make it prisoner. It was a powerful beast, more like a gorilla than an ape.

The tormented creature writhed.

"Does it remind you of anyone?" Big Tom whispered to Lila.

"Yes," Lila whispered back. "But don't say whom. It is too unkind."

"What devilishness are they up to now?" Little Tom muttered, as two blacks, only less brutal looking than their victim, emerged from the opposite thicket bearing bundles of dry palm leaves. "I wish I had a revolver."

"Same here," Big Tom muttered, as the two blacks dumped their bundles at the victim's feet.

More bundles were brought and heaped up, all in the same sinister silence. It was a feast of anticipated cruelty too sweet to be broken by idle chatter.

"They shan't finish it," Big Tom said under his breath, "so long as I keep my health."

He searched about now in the litter at his feet and found a stout club covered with sharp, hard thorns. Kicking off the thorns at the thin end he fashioned the weapon into a very serviceable mace, warranted to inflict considerable pain on a bare black hide. Little Tom followed his example. At a gesture from Lila he prepared a lighter club for her. The three were ready for the fun to begin.

So were those sadistic savages. A human beast, more of a brute than the helpless thing tied to the stake, leaped yelling into the ring with a jangling clatter of its shell and bone charms. It was the witch doctor intent on smelling out evil.

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Primitive religion at its best is rather a bestial thing. The three white spectators saw it at its best. That filthy savage, the seer and high priest of his tribe, pranced shrieking about the victim till the sweat washed the caked dogs' blood and fresh chickens' brains from his chest to his thighs, and still he bounded over the offals like an idiot on springs. To the frenzied cries of the spectators he responded with meaningless yells and frothings at the mouth.

His feathers and repulsive finery wilted in draggled clouts and clung to his glistening skin, but still he whirled about the victim. And the victim, dazed and terrified by these witless antics of a higher race, followed every gyration of its tormentor with jerks of its head and dumb fear in its eyes. Suddenly the anointed one collapsed in a screaming fit. Almost directly in front of the doomed ape he kicked and clawed at the offal, smearing himself with filth. The dumb brute for the moment had the better of the argument. It at least kept its dignity.

But the fun had scarcely begun. Like Spanish ladies at a bullfight, or Nordics at a prize ring, the women of the audience clapped and yelled for the next round. They were a red-blooded lot; there was nothing anaemic about those strong mothers of warriors. They were there to see blood, and they would stick it out till they got their money's worth.

The ape had an unfair advantage over them. Being denied the gift of speech it couldn't exhibit its emotions in the usual way. Therefore it was impossible to say just how much of a beast it really was at heart. The contrast between the spectators and their victim was almost of itself a conclusive disproof of the theory of evolution.

It is incredible that any ancestors of those women, however remote, could have resembled in the slightest degree that reserved ape. Could Swain have brushed the cobwebs from his eyes he would have seen in this incident the destroying evidence for which he had sought in vain for a quarter of a century. But Swain was too far-sighted to observe any truth in his immediate neighborhood.

THE second act began in ominous silence. Through the slowly parted leaves of the banana screen an impressive figure, wearing only a scarlet calico clout, and a band of the same material binding up its grizzled hair, advanced like a spectre straight toward the ape.

"There's our friend," Big Tom whispered. "Some beauty, isn't he?"

Swain had not stooped to the cheap finery of his predecessor. His only concession to tradition was a smear of yellow ochre on each cheek and a carefully adjusted dab of wet white chalk on each eyelid. Nevertheless he was, if anything, more repulsive than the cataleptic wreck clawing at the offal. His face was that of a man walking in his sleep. It had a dazed look, filmed over with coarse brutality.

"I wonder if he knows where he is?" Little Tom muttered. "Well, he will soon find out if he gets fresh with that ape."

Lila said nothing. There was something inexpressibly revolting about Swain's appearance and the way he walked.

In contrast to the first act, which might be described as a farce comedy, the second was performed in dead silence. Swain beckoned for the torch. The banana leaves parted, and a woman ran forward, bearing the smoking brand.

"Come on!" Big Tom shouted, tearing through the tangle of underbrush which separated them from the clearing.

It was a short fight and a merry one. The element of surprise, added to the natural cowardice of the blacks, aided justice quite materially. In their terror-stricken confusion those pious worshipers tumbled over one another, exposing recklessly their most fleshy spots to the rapid thwacking of the three thorny clubs. Swain alone escaped. He had seen them coming. But his friends suffered freely, if not gladly, for him, and the demands of common decency were generously met.

"Oh!" Lila panted, when they found themselves alone with the wretched ape. "How awful!"

"How the dickens are we to turn it loose?" Big Tom asked, cautiously approaching the powerful ape. "He may have taken a dislike to us."

The imploring eyes of the unhappy creature all but spoke.

"Here," said Little Tom, opening his pocket knife, "we've got to take some chances in this life. Get ready to run. Ready? All right; here goes."

He deftly cut the cruel cords binding the ape's neck to the stake. There was a flash of fur, a crash in the brush behind them, and it was gone.

"He might have stopped to say thank you," Big Tom laughed. "All things con-

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sidered though I'm glad that he didn't."

"Ugh! I hope I never see that beast again," Lila said.

"The ape?" Little Tom asked innocently.

"No. You know whom I mean. Let's go home. I can't eat anything."

"Nor I," Big Tom agreed. "This has been a hell of a picnic, I must say."

"There's one thing worth having out of all this wild afternoon," Little Tom remarked. "We know now who Swain's home folks are. He is one of the black crowd, right enough."

They discussed what was to be done about the incident. Should they tell the police? If they did, what good would it do? They decided to tell only Colton, and have it out with Swain in private. Leaving Lila at her place, the Blakes went home to clean up before they all met once more at dinner. Having recovered from their squeamishness they all had ravenous appetites.

On reaching their quarters the two Toms received an unpleasant surprise. The door had been wrenched open. Big Tom's workroom looked as if a cyclone had paid it a short visit.

"Anything missing?" Little Tom asked after the search.

"Only that splinter of meteoric iron. Swain's been here and spirited it away. What the devil am I to do?"

"Oh, just explain to the agent that your room was burglarized. He'll understand."

"I'm not worrying about that end of it. The agent is a decent fellow and will let the specimen go, I am sure. But the account I sent off to the *Phil. Mag.* this morning is a horse of a different color. Nobody will believe me when I say the specimen was lost. I'm done for. They will call me the champion ironclad liar of all time."

He sunk into a chair with a groan.

"Cheer up, father," Little Tom consoled. "I'll cable to the editor to return your manuscript unopened."

"Bright boy!" his father exclaimed with real joy. "And now the next thing on the program is to find Swain."

"Fat chance."

"Anyway I'm going to have a good try. For one thing I want to know where he found that meteor, and for another I crave to learn what perverted use that skunk is going to make of the splinter. Come on; dinner first."

CHAPTER IV

THE FIGHT AT THE RAVINE

SWAIN'S trail was easily followed so long as he fled by highways and waterways that could be called—by courtesy—half civilized. The pursuers met their first serious check at Basoko, the last strong link between Central Africa and the outside world. In this historic outpost, famous once as Stanley's headquarters, but now strangely inadequate and out of date with its low, battlemented walls, they learned from the executive in charge that Swain had been there less than twenty-four hours previously. Where had he gone? The agent shrugged his shoulders. In any direction there was at least plenty of room. From that point an ambitious or harassed traveler might skip to any part of the African continent. Swain had skipped.

Colton had decided abruptly, on hearing Blake's account of what they had seen in the forest, to close up shop and follow Swain. The remainder of his work lay well inland anyway, and he might as well inspect the interior now as later. For some months he had secretly held the opinion that an elucidation of Swain's case was of more importance scientifically than the compilation of superfluous statistics on the sleeping sickness. So he had shifted his base at the earliest moment possible.

"Don't think you have to come just because I am going," he said to Big Tom. "You two are here for a holiday, not for business as I am."

"I'm not so sure about that," Big Tom objected. "Friend Swain has run off with the most valuable piece of metal in the world. Like you, I have a holy curiosity to unscramble that fellow's eggs. Little Tom is coming along merely for the childish love of vulgar adventure."

"What about me?" a small voice inquired from the far corner. "I can't go back to that awful town in the Middle West. All my friends—"

"Would laugh at you," Little Tom finished for her. "Doctor Colton still needs a secretary. Don't you, Doc?"

"No worse than you need a nurse. If I did my duty she would cry. I suppose she has to come."

"Thank you," said Lila, demure as a cat who has stolen the fish.

On the trip up the river she made herself as unobtrusive as possible, attending

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to her everlasting reports and never butting into the men's deliberations. Although she said little, she listened hard and thought a lot. In many ways besides her beauty Lila Meredith was a most remarkable young woman.

"Well," said Colton after their discouraging interview with the agent at Basoko, "it's up to us. Let us see if any of these ivory-headed guides are good for anything. Where's the interpreter?"

Erasmus, the interpreter, was a queer specimen for a full blooded African. He was a pink-eyed, white-skinned, yellow-haired albino. His kind is less of a rarity than might be thought. Like most of them he was considerably above the average intelligence of the natives. Understanding at once what was wanted of him, he set about in his own way to gather clues. By nightfall he reported what he had picked up from the sleepy-eyed but observant blacks. Swain had gone farther up the river in a dugout with six native paddlers. Erasmus had even learned what tributary the dugout would follow. The paddlers somehow had managed to gossip before their hurried departure.

As quickly as possible the party, with their guides and carriers, bundled into dugouts and gave chase. Rather, they gave crawl; it is impossible to make a black man hurry when he wants to loaf.

For three weeks they pursued a rumor ever farther into the watery mazes of the central forest. At night they would hear that the fugitive had passed that way early the same morning; the next morning he would still be ahead. The truth began to dawn on them. Swain knew every ditch in the steaming forest as well as he knew the streets of Chicago, if not better. Where they took the long way round he took the short. The weary paddlers, almost on the point of open mutiny, hinted as much. They were ready to quit when the blind chase entered a new phase and set them free of hard labor.

At noon of the twenty-second day out from Basoko they ran slap onto Swain's dugout drawn up out of the mud. The footprints of the paddlers were still fresh. Following his lead the pursuers tied up their own lumbering dugouts, ordered the carriers to tote their loads, and took up the spoor of Swain's party. From the obvious lack of concealment on Swain's part it was evident that he did not know he was being followed.

The trail had been kept open, and that was about all that could be said of it. Probably it was a goatwalk, or a passage frequented by heavier animals in their passage to and fro in the forest; it certainly made slow going for the loaded porters. It was as dark as an ordinary cellar with but a single small window, and it smelt mustier, mouldier than the dampest cellar along the Mississippi. If the mystery of the primeval forest has a charm, the whites of the party failed to discover it.

It was not long in that semidark tunnel floored with dank vegetation, decayed wood and slimy fungi, before they lost trace of their quarry. But they did not worry. Swain, expert woodsman as he was, could not have gone a yard either to right or left of the trail. It was as true a tunnel as any blasted through solid rock. The matted roots and the solid nets of huge convolvuli walling the trees made as impenetrable a barrier as the steel grill of a bank vault.

THEIR first trace of the fugitive was a faint, pungent whiff of wood smoke. The party ahead had stopped to cook a meal. How they had managed to make any of that sodden punk burn was a mystery.

"They must have reached a clearing or an old plantation," Lila said.

Such proved to be the case. The ashes of the fire were still warm when the pursuers emerged into the blinding sunlight of a deserted clearing. On the farther side, the trail again plunged into the dim, gloomy forest.

"Not too fast," Colton advised. "Let us spy out the land before we attack. The more we learn of his doings by keeping our eyes open the less we shall have to drag out of him with questions. Swain isn't a talkative fellow."

During the two hours of their stay in the sunshine, Colton and the Blakes explored the clearing. A few tumble-down native huts, almost overgrown with rank vines, told the story. One hasty look inside the largest hut was enough.

"Sleeping sickness got them," Big Tom remarked, with a rather green look at Colton.

"Yes, and it proves one point I'm after. The infected flies can get through the jungle or up the river if you give them time. They're persevering pests."

"Shall we spend the night here?" Lila asked hopefully.

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"Afraid of the dark?" Colton laughed. "No; we'll go on till we smell their evening smoke."

And so they followed for five days, ever deeper and deeper into the depressing forest. After the second day they trudged along from dawn to dusk with scarcely a word. The little conversation that passed was confined to Tom junior's attempts to cheer up Lila. The excursion on the whole was about as cheerful as an unduly prolonged funeral.

The sixth day was critical. They all but missed their game. The noon smoke guided them safely as usual, but when evening fell there was nothing on the air but the eternal, damp mustiness of rotting wood and decaying leaves.

"We've missed them," Big Tom announced in tones hollow with tragedy.

"So it seems," Colton agreed. "Back we go over the trail. They must have branched off some time between lunch and dinner."

For the last day and a half the forest had grown opener. Occasional stretches of a half mile or so were easily penetrable. The party had been deceived by what they mistook for a clearly defined main trail. It was plain enough now that Swain and his paddlers had taken a side path through the forest.

"Our only hope is their evening fire," Lila sighed. "I wish they would sing, or make some noise. This church effect is getting on my nerves."

"Suppose two of us run back," Little Tom suggested, "so as to catch their fire before it goes out? The porters can't do more than three miles an hour. Come on, Lila."

They ran back as fast as they could in the fading daylight over their afternoon tracks. Night fell like a blanket, and still they kept on, guessing their way by the trees and undergrowth into which they blundered.

"Isn't this rather dangerous?" Lila hazarded.

"Babes in the wood, you mean? I suppose it is. Still, we can't let the bird escape now after all our trouble, can we? Gosh!"

Little Tom's mild exclamation was drowned by Lila's stifled shriek. Her arms were about his neck in a strangling embrace, not of affection but good, honest fright. The poor girl was scared as stiff as a corpse.

"What was it?" she stammered, when at last she could speak.

"Probably an ape. We woke him up when we walked under his roost, and he just dropped down to investigate."

They could still hear the faint padding of the great creature which had barely missed falling on their heads. The steady *pat pat* of its jogging over the sodden leaves, as it receded before them into the pitch darkness of the forest, had a curiously human sound. If Little Tom had heard the story of Swain's tree-climbing antics in Jackson Park, he would have been less bold about continuing the search. An honest ape wakened from its slumbers is less of a hair raiser in a dark forest than is an ex-medical missionary with apelike proclivities and a penchant for arboreal acrobatics.

"Take my hand," he said to the shaken Lila. "If we don't see a light soon we'll go back."

"If we can," she gulped.

"If not we can just sit till daylight and wait for the others to catch up with us." He seemed quite pleased at the prospect.

"What if we're off the trail? They say it is terribly easy to wander round and round in a circle in the forest."

"Aren't you thinking of the desert?"

"No, I'm sure it was the forest. That man at Kinshassa told me— Oh, my God, what's that?"

A truly ghastly sound shuddered up on the darkness from behind them and slightly to their left. "Glug-glug-glug-uggle-uggle-swish," it went, as if someone were holding an elephant's head under water till it almost drowned, letting it up at the last moment to sigh and inhale. That forlorn and utterly miserable succession of soul-destroying noises was repeated three times. With the third repetition Lila became limp in Little Tom's arms, and his knees all but collapsed under the double load. He was too paralyzed with fright to get any pleasure out of his sweet burden, or even to think. What beast made a noise like that? Whatever it was, it must be as big as a good-sized whale. Flinging Lila over his shoulder he faced about and started to blunder his way back.

Their senses returned simultaneously.

"Put me down," she begged. "You must think I'm an awful baby."

"I haven't been thinking about you or anything else," he confessed with a forced laugh. "What was it?"

"I don't know. I only hope it's dead by now."

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"Look!" he exclaimed, unintentionally throwing her into another fit.

When she came to, Lila found herself flat on the ground. One of Little Tom's boots reassuringly caressed her cheek. He was standing like a sentinel by her head.

"Don't yell," he whispered. "I see Swain's light."

He gave her a hand up and turned her round so that she could see the light. It was not a fire, but the flickering reflection thrown up from a pit or hollow on the lower branches of a tree.

"Let us go back and report before Swain hears us," he said in a whisper. "Give me your hand and mind your step. Don't make a noise."

The journey back was uneventful. They found the party on the verge of nervous prostration.

"Where the devil have you been all this time?" Big Tom demanded.

"Chasing butterflies, of course."

"You found them?" Colton asked eagerly.

"Why not? Experienced trackers like Lila and me couldn't boggle a simple little job like that."

"Then let two of us follow up at once. The other two can stay here till daylight and bring up the porters. It can't be far, so we shall have no chance to get out of touch with one another. Miss Meredith, I'm going to leave you here with Mr. Blake. Little Tom and I will spend the night on guard. If you don't catch up with us by six in the morning, fire a shot. I'll fire one in reply to lead you to us. Keep it up till we do meet."

"But we shall only scare off Swain that way," Big Tom objected.

"No we shan't. I don't intend letting him out of my sight from now on. Hereafter we all travel together. I've had enough of this Sherlock Holmes business. It's too risky by half in this blasted forest. Go ahead, Little Tom; I'm right on your heels."

THE two watchers had spent rather a miserable night. Sleep was impossible, even if they had wished to doze, on account of the army of ticks which marched and countermarched over the bodies of the two men, halting frequently for refreshments to strengthen them in their maneuvers. Dawn broke, misty, miasmatic and chilly. Every bone in their bodies ached as if it had been pounded with a steak mallet.

They breakfasted on quinine and stole back with the full daylight to their post. Swain's camp was just getting into action.

The thin smoke from their wood fire curled straight up through the misty air with a maddening suggestion of warmth and breakfast. Two of Swain's blacks squatted before the fire, poking in sticks and fanning up a blaze. Presently they were joined by the remaining four. The newcomers carried a frying pan, a coffee pot and several ant-proof tins of provisions. Swain still slumbered in the bushes.

His camp was pitched by the side of a stream running almost noiselessly over the polished rock of a deep ravine. In this part of the forest there was very little underbrush. For a tropical forest the trees on either bank of the ravine were almost suspiciously open-spaced. Although there was no sign of the recent use of the axe, the whole region had a suspiciously civilized appearance. It looked as if it had been cleared less than twenty years previously and kept free of scrub ever since. Yet there was no evidence of human habitations as far as the two watchers could see.

All through this open forest frequent outcroppings of broken rock and mounds of large boulders testified to the poverty of the soil. Perhaps it was this fact which accounted for the openness of the trees.

The stream slipping fast and silent over the rocky bottom of the ravine was unlike any other that the party had seen in the forest. The waters of the others were a dark brown from the rotting vegetation which fouled their courses; this stream was as clear and green as bottle glass.

"That water comes from a spring," Colton remarked. "See how clear it is."

"Look around the bend—just above Swain's camp," Little Tom replied. "There's where it comes out of the rock."

Colton followed the direction of Little Tom's finger and saw the immediate source of the stream. It was an almost circular opening, about two feet in diameter, in the face of an unbroken cliff. Through this opening the clear water gushed in an even flow, to spread out immediately over a natural spillway as beautifully curved as that of a modern dam. Nature had done a good job. The steady flow followed the curve of the spillway without a riffle and with scarcely a whisper.

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Although neither of the men was a geologist, they could not help noting the peculiar nature of the outcroppings of rock and boulders all through the open forest. The basic material appeared to be a coarse-grained sandstone. The remarkable feature was the curious black pattern veined over several of the larger rocks and peppered haphazard on some of the smaller. The latter looked as if they had been plugged full of rusty iron slugs and fragments of new nails from a shotgun fired at close range.

Here and there an occasional lump the size of a grapefruit stood out from the pile on which it lay, catching the eye immediately on account of its uniform, shiny black texture. These black lumps looked for all the world like bungling attempts to manufacture small cannon balls. Here nature had been less successful than with the spillway. The mock cannon balls were roughly round, but varied from almost perfect spheres to crude ovoids like badly pressed cakes of soap.

Swain appeared just as the first enticing aroma of fried bacon took the raw edge off the dank mist. Colton and Little Tom could hardly contain themselves. They were on the point of sneaking back to their own safari for breakfast when, with startling abruptness, the battle began.

A boulder the size of a man's body crashed down on the rocks not two yards from Swain's campfire, shattered itself into a hundred fragments, and splashed noisily into the glassy stream. With a yell as of one man Swain and his six blacks leaped to their feet and scattered. Two of the blacks had been struck by flying splinters of rock, as shown by the blood streaming down their backs.

A second boulder shot down after the first. This time the aim was better. One of the blacks flattened out on the smooth rock and the boulder, rebounding from his mangled body, plunged into the stream. By this time Swain and the remaining blacks had found their firearms. The attack was evidently not unexpected, for Swain had an elephant gun and the blacks either rifles or sawed off shotguns. Seeking what shelter they could find in the rocky bed of the stream, the attacked opened fire at random on the trees on both banks of the ravine. Colton and Little Tom hastily crawled behind bigger trunks. They were in little danger, however, for it would have been almost impossible to hit either of them from the rocks below.

The shooting was at its wildest when the enemy, about to retreat, showed itself. For barely a second a huge, dim gray shape appeared from behind a tree on the opposite bank of the ravine. Then instantly it flitted away into the mists and was lost to sight.

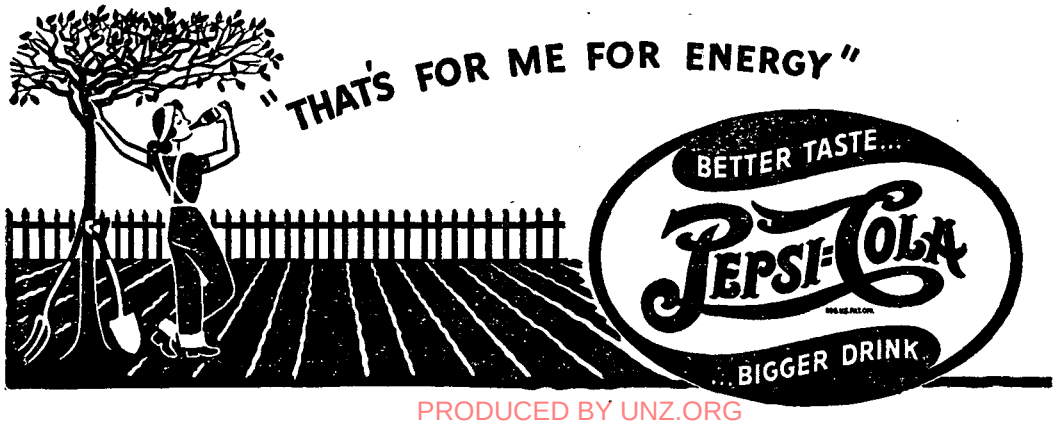
Colton remembered his instructions to Big Tom and Lila.

"Those shots will bring up our crowd on the run. I'll stay here and keep watch while you go back and warn them. Leave Erasmus in charge of the porters, armed and ready to fight. Bring back four rifles with you."

"What about Lila?"

"She must stay with us. The porters may bolt when they get scared. Bring her back with you and Big Tom. I'm going to see what happens before I let Swain know we're here."

WHEN Little Tom returned, cautiously crawling up to Colton's hiding place with Lila and his father, he brought with



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him not only a rifle for the doctor but a good breakfast.

"Bless your soul," the doctor murmured fervently. "I'll remember you in my will for this."

"Bless Lila; she thought of it first."

"Good girl. Better take your places behind trees before they smell us."

"Anything exciting happened?"

"No. They chucked the dead black into the stream and ate their breakfast."

Little Tom and Lila took their places within whispering distances of one another, while Big Tom crouched down beside Colton. For nearly an hour nothing unusual happened. The men below went about their routine of cleaning up camp for the day as if the death of one of their party were a trifle. To the black man a corpse is a corpse and nothing more. To Swain it seemed to be merely a useless cadaver. Perhaps, after all, their attitude was the sensible one, although it was a bit callous. They made no attempt to remove the traces of the tragedy.

Having put the camp in order, Swain's men proceeded in a leisurely fashion to the day's real business. A small iron-bound box was lugged out from the stores. This box at once attracted the attention of the watchers. In addition to the two handles it had two bolted rings on each of the six sides. A long, thin steel cable, with steel handgrips attached at one end, was next brought out and coiled. This completed the preparations, and the men sat down to rest.

The morning sun easily penetrated the sparser forest. Soon the atmosphere became like that of a Turkish bath, and a horde of pestiferous insects buzzed forth to enjoy themselves. The watchers were in torment. To slay the enemy with smart slaps was out of the question; silence must be preserved even at the cost of a skin smarting from ankles to scalp. Attempts at extermination by slow, noiseless pressure proved futile. The insects were quick on the wing and as nimble on their feet as a bantam boxer. The four investigators squirmed and suffered.

Down below things went better. One of the blacks was detailed to swat the enemy while his companions slept. The way of the transgressor is said to be hard. Swain, for the moment, had it pretty soft. Colton cursed under his breath and longed to execute a war dance with hobnailed boots on the prostrate forms of the sleepers.

Shortly after three o'clock Lila had a recurrence of the heart failure which had seized her in the dark.

"Uggle-uggle-uggle-glug-glug-swish," the hair-raising noise began with inconsequential abruptness. The eerie racket was even more awesome by daylight than dark, for logically one would have expected to see the beast responsible for the noise, whereas nothing but the uninhabited trees was visible for a radius of a mile. The strangling monster made its second attempt to swallow a drink, and Lila all but collapsed. At the third and final repetition of the expiring agony she unashamedly sought relief by burying her beautiful head in Little Tom's shirt bosom. It really was more than any normal girl should be expected to stand.

Little Tom kept his nerve this time. He found the noise quite interesting, and Lila's warm head altogether delightful. Colton and Big Tom stared at one another with their eyes bulging and their jaws dropped. They were reassured by the nonchalance with which Swain's crowd took the uproar. The blacks slowly sat up, stretched themselves, and got to their feet. Swain did likewise.

"They have a queer alarm clock, I must say," Big Tom whispered with a silent chuckle. "If they can stand it I guess we can. Hullo! What's happened to the soda fountain?"

To their amazement they saw the green water in the stream dwindle in its rocky channel and inch by inch cease to flow. The supply had been cut off at headquarters. Glancing toward the circular orifice in the rock wall they saw the last dribble trickling from its lip. Presently this too ceased, and the gaping hole yawned at them darkly, invitingly. The simple, natural explanation for what they had heard and seen did not immediately occur to them, for they were too busy watching Swain. They simply accepted the fact as a fact, and postponed theorizing.

Swain was vigorously cuffing his five blacks into action. One seized the iron-bound box with the dozen bolted rings, another reached for the coiled steel cable. Swain went to his stores and procured a large flashlight, which he handed to the fourth black, gave his rifle to the fifth, and gave the signal to advance.

"They're going into that hole in the wall," Colton whispered. "Where a cat can go a mouse can follow."

"Surely, if the mouse is fool enough. I

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vote we all stay here for the present."

Colton said no more until the last of Swain's party had followed the leader up over the spillway and through the circular opening in the cliff.

"Miss Meredith," he ordered sharply, springing to his feet, "run back to our safari and bring over our electric flashlights. There should be eight, if those thieving porters haven't absconded with some of them. Better take your rifle."

"Where shall I find you when I come back?"

"Either here or down in the ravine. We're going to inspect Swain's outfit. There is no danger, I guess. The enemy seems to be on the other side of this ditch, and anyway he's quit for the day."

Lila hurried off at a smart run, holding her rifle at the balance.

"Now fellows," Colton began, "one of us must give the orders. Who's it?"

"Draw lots," Big Tom recommended.

The first draw eliminated Little Tom.

"I resign," Big Tom chuckled. "You're the boss, doctor. What's on?"

"First, just to avoid confusion if we get into a mix-up, you two must obey orders. Is that all right?"

They nodded.

"Then I'm going down to search Swain's baggage. You two stay up here and pot anyone who tries to interfere with my work."

They saluted with mock gravity and Colton scrambled down the precipitous side of the ravine. Presently they lost him behind the clump of brush from which Swain had fetched his paraphernalia.

"I hope Lila's safe," Little Tom muttered after a tense ten minutes of silence.

"Oh, she's all right," Big Tom replied uneasily. "I wonder what the dickens is keeping her?"

"Hadn't I better go and see?"

"No. You have no orders to leave this post."

"That's so. I guess I'm a buck private in the rear rank. What's happened to Colton? Is he dead back there?"

THEY sat and fumed in nervous silence for another ten minutes. Then suddenly they started to their feet. Two muffled shots in quick succession reverberated and buffeted down the narrow ravine.

"Where was that?" Big Tom asked, trying to locate the source of the sound.

"It wasn't from Colton. Listen!"

They thought they heard a succession of short, savage yells. Almost instantly half a dozen shots, again muffled, rang out, and they placed the noise. Those shots were being fired in the cave into which Swain and his five blacks had disappeared.

"They seem to be having a hot time of it in there," Little Tom remarked.

"I'll bet only one of the six comes out of there alive," his father remarked grimly.

"And it won't be one of the blacks," Little Tom added. "Where the deuce is Colton? Didn't he hear those shots?"

Colton had heard the shooting perfectly, but, being by nature cool-headed, he resolutely refused to get excited. He went steadily on with his search of Swain's effects. At last he found what he was looking for. Pocketing the splinter of meteoric iron which Swain had stolen from Big Tom's workroom, the doctor made his way back to the bed of the now extinct stream.

Things began to happen all at once. The enemy, roused by the muffled shots from the cave, had silently and invisibly advanced to the field of battle. Slipping from tree to tree, high up in the dense foliage overhead, the attackers had easily escaped the attention of the Blakes, whose vision was focused either on the channel or expectantly on the tree trunks across the ravine.

The enemy fired the first shot, apparently from the sky, for neither of the Blakes saw what had hurled down the huge boulder which crashed down within three yards of Colton, just emerging from the scrub.

The doctor, being in command, kept his head.

"Behind you!" he shouted, ducking back under cover of the opposite bank.

The two defenders wheeled round, rifles raised, to face the enemy. They saw nothing.

"Look up," Colton shouted from the comparative safety of his refuge. "Every man for himself!" he yelled, as the splintering boulders began to rain down on the rocky floor from his side of the ravine. With methodical regularity and steady nerves he started shooting.

The Blakes had no time to follow Colton's defense. Their own engrossed all of their attention. Like a huge, hairy spider an enormous apelike brute dropped from the branches above them and stood snarling not six feet away.

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"I'll get him," Big Tom shouted, raising his rifle and aiming at the creature's right eye. "Shoot the one to your left!"

The forest was alive with the huge gray brutes that dropped by twos and threes from every tree. They were not gorillas, but some bigger, stronger beast, all but covered with tufts and patches of coarse gray hair like a Scotch shepherd dog's. Between the patches of hair the bare black skin, bathed in some sticky exudation, glistened in the light. The two men found themselves hemmed in by a hundred of the seven foot brutes. Without a sound the beasts slowly advanced upon the pair, walking upright and easily like human beings, with the obvious intention of forcing the men over the edge of the ravine. Their tactics were only too evidently directed by intelligence.

Big Tom got his the first shot, clean through the brain. Before Blake fired the creature instinctively shot up its right arm to protect its eyes. Did it know what firearms were? With a nerve racking groan, singularly like a man's dying agony, it lurched forward, collapsed, kicked convulsively, and was dead.

"Help!" Little Tom shouted.

His shot struck the steadily advancing brute squarely on its massive breast bone. The giant coughed, spat, and came on. Big Tom gauged his son's chances at a glance, decided that he had two seconds to spare, and shot the beast nearest him in the stomach. Wheeling round to help Little Tom he saw the gigantic brute attacking his son stoop and pick up a large stone from the loose pile at its feet.

The missile, hurled with terrific force, knocked Little Tom's hat off and broke an overhanging branch six inches thick clean off. The infuriated beast, keeping its rage-red eyes on its mark, stooped sideways and groped with its huge left hand for a second stone. The palm and long, muscular fingers closed over one of the shiny black natural cannon balls.

Then a strange thing happened. The brute, not seeing what its hand had clutched, because its eyes were riveted on Little Tom's head, straightened up to hurl the stone. The tremendous muscles of the arm jerked the brute off its balance before the hand could release its hold. That black stone, no bigger than a grapefruit, probably saved Little Tom's life.

For all the involuntary tugging of the straining muscles in the creature's arm the black stone remained fixed. Straightening up to recover its balance, the brute raised its left arm to the level of its shoulder. That involuntary movement gave Big Tom his chance. As coolly as a sailor shooting clay pigeons in a gallery he aimed at the exposed armpit and pulled the trigger. The steel bullet, ranging downward, severed the aorta, and with a sudden gush of blood from the mouth the huge brute tumbled forward dead.

THEY were now in the thick of it. Undeterred by their fellows' death the rest of the horde continued its slow advance with machinelike precision. Another ten seconds and the two men must leap over the rocky edge of the ravine or stand still and have their backs broken like straws. Their lucky shots were over. They loaded and reloaded, pumping the triggers with deadly regularity. But still the gray horde advanced. The steel-nosed bullets either flattened on the bones of the brutes, or tore harmlessly through huge muscles that seemed to feel no pain. An occasional shot to the stomach doubled one up, but it merely coughed and came on, bleeding internally. A machine gun would have been useless against their brutal strength and more brutal courage.

Retreating an inch at a time the men fought their way back to the brink of the ravine, desperately feeling for the least hazardous place to jump. They dared not look round, for fear of the inevitable rush which would send them flying backward over the edge to the rocky floor below.

With a cry of despair Little Tom flung away his rifle and began hurling stones. The bolt had jammed, and he could no longer fill the magazine. His father shouted to him to run and jump, but he held his ground.

A second rapid *crack-crack-crack* of a rifle joined Big Tom's. It was Lila, shooting at random into the gray horde from behind.

"Get out!" Big Tom yelled. "We'll jump."

She emptied the shells from her rifle and reloaded. Her frenzied firing caused a momentary halt in the long gray lines. It was the men's chance, and they took it. To stay with Lila was useless. She must run for the safari and make her stand there with the porters. There were firearms enough for about a third of them. Flinging his rifle before him Big Tom darted for the easiest way down,

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dragging Little Tom with him. Simultaneously Lila's firing stopped. She had done what common sense dictated and bolted for the porters.

Bruised and bleeding the two picked themselves up at the bottom of the ravine. Where was Colton? He had ceased firing. Had he been crushed by a boulder? The opposite bank of the ravine was being patrolled by the huge gray beasts, each hefting easily a jagged lump of rock the size of a man's body. They swung these chunks as lightly as if they were sticks of firewood.

Cautiously the first of the silent brutes on their own side began to feel its way down the cliff of the ravine.

"We're nicely caught," Little Tom remarked. "If we run for the other side those intelligent devils will drop half a ton of rock on us. Shoot, while the shooting's good."

Big Tom raised his rifle and pulled the trigger. It clicked smartly, and that was all. The hard fall when Blake had flung it down to the rocky bottom of the ravine had jammed the mechanism, rendering it useless.

"They've got us, I guess," Big Tom said quietly, clubbing his rifle for the last, hopeless stand.

Hand over hand the scout of the beasts clambered down the steep bank. It was about to let go and jump the remaining distance, its arms both raised high above its head as it clung to the rocks, when a crack from the left told that Colton was still alive and shooting. It was a clean shot. The bullet found its way between the creature's exposed ribs to its heart. It kicked and somersaulted backward to the stone floor, landing squarely on its head, with its arm stretched wide out and its muscular legs kicking at the sky.

A shout from Colton appraised them of his refuge. Just as the gray hordes cast caution to the winds and swarmed down both sides of the ravine, the two men bolted for the orifice in the cliff. Shoving his son before him Big Tom scrambled up the spillway. Little Tom in turn dragged his father up and shoved him through the opening. By dint of squeezing and squirming sideways Big Tom got safely in. He and Colton lugged Little Tom through by main force.

Like shock troops the gray horde advanced to the spillway. As if by a preconcerted plan they pyramided and let those in the rear climb over their backs. The first huge brute thrust one powerful arm into the circular opening, groped for the men within and, failing to feel them, put forth all of its enormous strength to force an entrance.

Colton did not shoot. He could have blown the creature's face off where he stood in the dark tunnel, but he wisely held his fire. That immense beast might as easily have passed its shoulders through the eye of a needle as through the opening into the cave. Having exhausted every reasonable chance to enter, it showed remarkable intelligence. It immediately withdrew, leaving the entrance clear.

"That brute must have a human brain in its head," Colton remarked. "I'm going to see what they're doing."

He advanced cautiously and peered out. The whole horde had withdrawn to hold a council of war. Their language seemed to consist solely of signs and gestures. Not one made the slightest sound. Presently a gigantic gray brute, its head and shoulders towering above the mob, forced its way to the center of the crowd. If they had a leader, this must be he. It was fully nine feet tall, and four feet across the shoulders. It could have broken the strongest gorilla's back with one twist of its huge hands as easily as a man snaps a twig.

"Come and see their general," Colton invited. "Here's the devil himself come to direct the attack. We're in for it, I suspect. I vote for a retreat. We may break our necks in the dark, but there are worse deaths."

"Lila is showing her usual good sense," Little Tom observed, pointing to a dense pillar of smoke streaming up above the forest half a mile away. "These animals don't love fire, I imagine, any better than the rest. If Lila keeps that going all night she should be safe."

"Miss Meredith is no fool, for a girl," Colton admitted, and started to feel his way back into the tunnel.

CHAPTER V

THE CAPTAIN

THE exploration of the tunnel was to be postponed.

"Hold on a minute," Little Tom advised, "those fellows are just going to put on their show. Tickets are free, gentlemen. No crowding please, step forward."

The three men hurriedly disposed

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themselves about the narrow circular window so as to get the best view of the strange drama being enacted below them in the ravine. Over two hundred of the enormous gorilla-like beasts were grouped in dozens and twenties about their gigantic captain, the nine foot brute with the broadest shoulders and most powerful chest of them all. Except that they carried on their deliberations by signs instead of oratory, the beasts were a fair caricature of a political meeting just before the chairman's summons to official business.

They might have been trying to decide on a dark horse for their next presidential candidate. It would be unfair to say which of the great parties they most closely resembled; the similarity to each was about evenly balanced. The three spectators could not refrain from a delighted grin. The take-off might have been planned by the devil himself. It was too good in its unflattering realism to make anyone but a confirmed leader of the people sore.

As in most conventions, so in this. It was not long before the brawling began. Logic, if they had any, was dropped. It is an unpractical nuisance anyway. The two hundred got down to fundamentals in a hurry. Logic and reason, even the most primitive, are tainted with modernism. Such, in short, appeared to be their theory. Certainly it was their practice.

With a peevish outburst of truly human feeling the huge Captain began the argument. He opened it with his foot and closed it with his fist. The creature with whom he disagreed evidently advised one plan of attack on the obnoxious humans while the Captain favored another. So much was plain from the course of the discussion, which briefly was as follows:

The Captain raised his tremendous right leg till the thigh bone rested parallel with the ground and the lower part of the leg dangled vertically. This was point the first. The second point was a sudden straightening of the whole leg, till it stood out at right angles to the body. The third point was made simultaneously and emphatically with the second; the Captain's right foot caught his opponent a glancing blow of terrific force in the region of the spleen and spun the obstinate creature smartly around. The Captain now had his opponent in the strategic position for his clinching and unanswerable fourth point.

While the beast's back was toward him, and before it could face about to see what was coming, the Captain's sledge hammer fist had shot out like a battering ram, struck the skull just above the last vertebra, and broken the neck with a sickening crack that echoed smartly against the sides of the ravine. On the whole it was a very pretty demonstration of the primitive version of the well known political maxim, that it is foolish to slap a man's face when it is just as easy to stab him in the back.

The debate became general. It was clear to the three men that they were the subject of discussion. From the gestures in their direction it appeared that one faction of the legislature favored an immediate attack, possibly by battering down the solid wall of the cliff with stones until the circular orifice was sufficiently enlarged to admit a storming party, while the more conservative faction advised a blockade and a strict adherence to the time honored tactics of their grandfathers.

So far as the men could make out, the conservatives wished to force them into the open, perhaps by starvation, or perhaps by retiring and letting the captives foolishly imagine that they were free to escape. The excited gestures of this party, pointing to the tops of the cliffs bordering the ravine, sufficiently indicated the further course of their proposed campaign. Once the men were out of the tunnel and running for liberty, it would be a simple matter to drop boulders on them from the edge of the ravine.

The radicals, on the other hand, by expressive pantomime, registered their vote in favor of a siege, to begin at once with a battering down of the wall around the circular opening. Both plans had much in their favor. The factions were about evenly divided. The conservatives, however, had an undoubted advantage in that the Captain, like ninety-nine leaders out of every hundred, was a staunch adherent of their party.

So far the debate had been orderly and conducted in strict accordance with parliamentary procedure. Not a voice had been raised above the usual conversational pitch, that is, figuratively. But these were dumb beasts, and their ordinary tone of expression vented itself in mild pullings out of tufts of gray hair, gnashing of teeth, and luscious bites in the fleshier parts of legs.

Realizing that no decision could be

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reached by such desultory gossip the Captain, acting as chairman or speaker, called for a division, and the two factions went into executive session.

The conservatives lined up on the right of the ravine, the radicals on the left. Personalities now were bandied freely from side to side of the House. One member disliked the color of an opponent's hair, always had disliked it in fact, and proceeded to prove his assertion. The chairman, towering over the disorderly chamber, rapped smartly for order. His gavel, generously loaned by the radicals, was as effective as it was unique. No trumpery bauble of brass and ivory ever raised such a cracking racket as did the monstrous gray brute swung by one ankle round and round the Captain's head. One after another the noisy radicals were silenced by that efficient gavel, till a full score had taken their seats never to rise and object again.

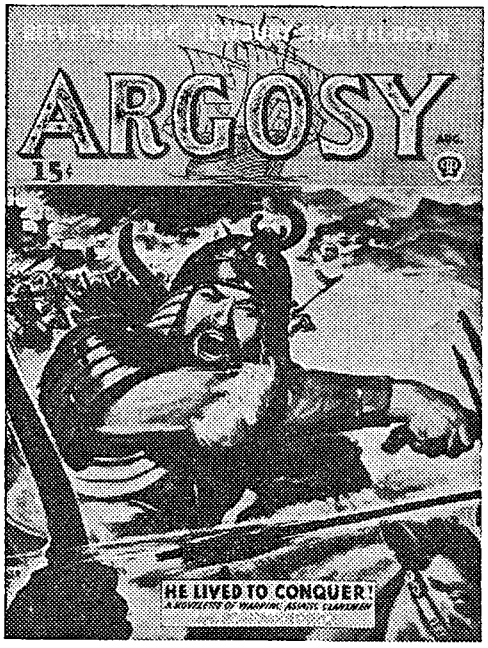
The speaker rather overdid his part. Murmurings arose that he was exceeding his lawful authority by cutting off legitimate debate. The radicals left the assembly in a body and took seats in the gallery. It was a dignified gesture of protest.

FOR perhaps a full minute these protestants squatted in dour silence on the left bank of the ravine, looking down in disgust on their victorious opponents. Their rights had been trampled on and they were as sore as boils. An ultimatum was the proper liniment to ease their bruised self-respect.

The ultimatum was a weighty document, replete with hard facts. It missed the Captain by two inches. The half ton or so of its unanswerable arguments shattered into a hundred flying chunks. Four of the obstinate conservatives were convinced on the spot. The rest, mad as wild bees, declared war.

The fight was on. With its beginning a sudden change came over the combatants. They lost much of their human appearance and became three parts pure beast. Up till now they had walked erect, like men. There was a sudden lapse to the ambling gait of the gorilla, with frequent tappings of the ground by the back of the hand to maintain balance as they hobbled about in search of missiles.

"Look at that one," Colton said, pointing to a great gray beast on the bank. It was having difficulty in keeping its erect posture as it lurched toward a huge



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boulder. "Does its walk remind you of anything?"

"Swain," Big Tom replied, "when he came out of the cooler and collapsed to all fours. I wonder what he's doing now?"

"Exploring the cave behind us," Little Tom remarked. "I hope he doesn't sneak up on us in the dark. He has a rifle, you know."

"So I heard this morning."

"His blacks may have shot him," Little Tom said hopefully. "There was quite a lot of shooting shortly after they came in here."

"I hope not," Colton replied. "Swain may tell us a lot if we can get him to talk. Just look at those beasts going at it!"

The radicals on the bank had found the range. Instead of trying to drop half-ton masses of rock on the conservatives as they had at first done, they now resorted to small ammunition, stones the size of a man's head, and even smaller. Curiously enough some of the smallest missiles did the most damage. The carnage was terrible. After half an hour of it two-thirds of those below were either dead or maimed and dying. Why did not the conservatives retreat up the ravine? They could have passed out of the firing-zone in five minutes, yet they held their hopeless position with ferocious tenacity and superb stupidity.

The Captain was everywhere. His prodigious feats of strength seemed to encourage his doomed followers to stick it out to the bitter and bloody end. Seizing the largest fragments of rock, and the heaviest boulders which the radicals hurled down, he flung them wide and high with terrific force at the gray figures on the bank. He rarely missed, and each hit was a kill. Rapidly the ranks of the radicals thinned and dwindled to half their original strength.

The crunching of bones, the almost human noises of pain emitted by the mortally wounded, and the brutal, brainless ferocity of the whole insane battle revolted the onlookers. Would they never have enough? Not till the last mangled body stopped twitching on the crimson floor of the ravine. The smell of blood, mounting to their brains, had obliterated the last semblance of reason. They were beasts now, nothing more.

At last the Captain was hit. A small black stone, no bigger than a hen's egg struck him on the left forearm. The men did not see which gray beast had hurled the stone, but the Captain evidently had. His left arm was as badly broken—it was a compound fracture—as if it had been struck with a forty pound sledge hammer. The ferocious brute held out the injured arm and looked at it, regardless of the missiles crashing down all about him. He could understand pain.

Stalking directly to the wall of the ravine he marked his enemy and laboriously pulled himself up the precipitous rock with his uninjured arm, his toes feeling for the precarious footholds. Would he reach the top? Fragments of rock and small boulders rained about him, frequently striking his thighs and shoulders, but he climbed steadily up to his revenge.

The beasts on the bank for the first time showed terror. For a moment it seemed as if they were about to break and scatter. Then their brainless love of a fight restored their courage. A dozen of them leaped to a rock that must have weighed three tons, and, by the sheer strength of all their knotted muscles, slowly tugged and shoved it toward the bank, directly above the Captain. He looked up and saw it. Instantly he flattened himself against the wall.

The huge boulder toppled, seemed to hang suspended for a second, and shot over the cliff in a graceful parabola. Had those gray brutes above known some elementary mechanics they could have foreseen that it would be impossible to hit their target. The curvature of the natural path carried the projectile well clear of its mark, and the Captain resumed his climb. The shot, however, was fairly successful otherwise. It smashed three of the conservatives gathered in a knot to view their leader's progress.

Reaching the top the Captain swung his injured arm over the edge and dug his feet into a convenient crevice. Then with his sound arm he reached for the leg nearest him. He got it the first grab. A quick jerk, and the unfortunate radical was sprawling like a falling autumn leaf in midair. Having disposed of one the Captain reached for another. In this way he pitched clean over his head to their deaths eight of the defenders. After the eighth had broken his neck on the rocks below it dawned on the rest that the red-eyed Captain meant business. They hastily fell back from the edge, giving the injured Captain just the opportunity he needed. In two seconds he was over the top.

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The radicals had not erred. The Captain's fighting blood was up. He meant murder so long as he had an arm and two legs left. With a leap like an enraged tarantula's he was among them, striking out with feet and fist. Four of the great gray beasts sank to the ground, their necks broken, in as many seconds. Flashing round, the Captain, now stark mad, sprang upon the five that had sought to attack him from the rear. With a furious rush he kicked and cuffed them over the edge of the ravine. Then he went after the panic stricken remnant. There were in all perhaps forty. But they were without a leader and badly shaken. Before the maddened Captain's systematic fury they were as helpless as a lot of bedridden invalids attacked by a maniac.

One after another he took the bigger brutes by the scruffs of their necks or by their legs and, not bothering to lug them to the edge, pitched them high over his head so that they shot clear of the brink and smashed like bottles on the rocky bottom.

WITH the more powerful brutes disposed of, the rest was easy. The Captain scorned to use his good right arm. His feet were sufficient. Either from fright or stupidity the doomed beasts seemed to have lost the power of locomotion. The Captain on the other hand had suddenly acquired the agility of a Japanese acrobat. He was as light on his feet as a featherweight. The terror of his victims no doubt was a spiritual aid to his war of extermination.

All animals are instinctively afraid of a mad individual of their own species, and the Captain was madder than any mad dog that ever cleaned out its home village. By fours and fives he rounded up the stragglers, herded them to the edge—he seemed to keep in mind the steepest falls—and kicked them over. He never made the mistake of dumping a fresh load on top of an old. He would as soon have thought of waiting till the radicals' friends, if they had any, hurried up with nets and feather mattresses. His madness was of the inspired kind that gets quick, complete results.

While their leader was performing these prodigies of valor, his friends below stood gaping up in motionless admiration. Like all primitive, strong, red-blooded races, they dearly loved a butchery. The Roman arena, the Spanish bullring, the white prize fight never, any one of them,

An enormous ape-like brute dropped like a huge hairy spider from the branches above, and stood snarling not six feet away

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provided quite so gorgeous a spectacle as this. In some respects it beat even the Battle of the Marne or Verdun. It was more concentrated.

One did not have to piece together different scraps of the engagement from inaccurate press accounts; here the whole show was visible at a glance. One can hardly censure those deluded survivors for stupidly forgetting their safety in an orgy of esthetic enjoyment. After all they were dumb, with no thought of the morrow or even of the next half hour. They got their medals when the Captain had finished distributing honors above.

Having mopped up the radicals the Captain rested for a minute from his labors, and strolled along the edge of the ravine, his useless left arm dangling at his side. His body was idle, but his mind —if he had any beyond the sum total of his rich behavior—was as busy as a stinging bee. Finally he found what he wanted, a large pile of loose stones, most of which were plentifully peppered with the strange, shiny black polka dots. This was by no means the only such pile in that region of the forest. It elicited the Captain's involuntary admiration because it happened to be lying precisely where he wanted it, namely, directly opposite the narrowest part of the ravine. Here lay the ammunition, there, below him, the enemy. For his bloodlust was now such that it clouded his clear perceptions, and no longer permitted him to distinguish between friend and foe, conservative and radical.

Killing had become a habit. And on top of his recent bloody experiences he was now undoubtedly mad. It would be idle, therefore, not to use to the limit the fifty devil power which pulsed and throbbed through his veins like the steady drive of a turbine. So he reasoned, or rather, so he behaved. Ammunition and gray bodies were surely made for one another.

He stopped short by the pile of loose stones. Theorizing was at an end. With incredible speed he sprang into action. He became a brutal, deadly machine of unerring accuracy. The black peppered missiles, fatal in some peculiar way not yet guessed by the three watchers of the slaughter, flew like bullets from his flashing right hand. The eye could not follow the speed of that living machine. He never missed. It was useless for the terrified remnant to scramble at the walls, or to seek safety by escaping from the trap. The black missiles pinned them for a moment to the rock walls before they collapsed, bored through from back to chest, or cracked their skulls as they hunched over and tried to dart through the narrows.

No expert marksman with a modern rifle was ever more certain of his target. He never broke a leg or an arm. To have done so would have wasted ammunition. The supply of black stones was generous, but not inexhaustible, and the machine had a brain that could count up to at least a hundred. His favorite target seemed to be the back of the neck, just at the base of the skull. A hit there meant instant death.

The last survivor, a large, dignified beast of strangely human aspect, threw up its arms. It might have been merely an accidental coincidence, that familiar gesture of surrender. And it may have been nothing more significant than blind chance that for a second stayed the arm of the slayer. All races of men understand the meaning of the hands raised high above the head. Did the beasts? Apparently not. If he did he decided to take no prisoner. The missile found its mark squarely in the center of the upturned chin and issued from the back of the head. The last shot must have had a terrific drive behind it to shatter that massive skull.

The red rays of the setting sun streamed through the sparse trunks of the forest, straight down the narrow ravine, lighting up the crimson shambles like the floor of hell. The solitary victor turned his back on the scene of his triumph, shaded his eyes for a moment, and stumbled off toward the setting sun. That was the last the men saw of him on that occasion, a bowed, shambling giant whose outline shone like a fiery nimbus, shuffling toward the night.

"WHAT now?" Colton asked. "Shall we go out and take a chance of getting through to the safari?"

"All the beasts except the Captain seem to be dead," Big Tom remarked. "So it should be safe enough. The Captain looked as if he were going home to bed."

"But what about Swain?" Little Tom objected. "We came here to watch his doings, didn't we? What's the use of going back empty handed now that we've wasted the whole day?"

"Very well," Colton said. "Big Tom go back to the safari and look after Miss

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Meredith. Little Tom and I will wait here till Swain comes out."

Without a word Big Tom squeezed himself through the circular hole. There remained just sufficient daylight to show him an easy way up the side of the ravine.

"Expect us when you see us," Colton called after him. "Tell Lila not to worry about Little Tom. I still have a perfectly good rifle and plenty of shells, and this tunnel is as safe as a church."

So he thought. The two, left to themselves, started to explore by the aid of a box of wax matches. The tunnel was about seven feet high. The two foot opening evidently was the hole left by a small stone that had weathered out centuries ago. Since then the action of water had enlarged it to its present diameter.

For forty feet the tunnel went straight back into the heart of the rock. This stretch was perfectly level. The next began to slope up very gradually, perhaps a one-foot rise in fifty feet. They could only judge the distance by the time it took them to walk. When they had traversed about a thousand yards the upward slope changed gently to a level stretch of about a hundred yards. This section of the tunnel was only about five feet high.

Their matches were now running short. Further exploration without torches seemed foolhardy, as they heard, not far ahead, the steady falling of water. It sounded as if it were being poured into a vast bowl.

Then they knew that they had blundered over a thousand yards up the siphon of a huge intermittent spring which was about to "blow" and discharge the day's accumulation of water from its vast bowl.

They broke into a run just as the first dribble of water trickled over the level stretch of the siphon's highest point. It would take time, of course, for the rising water in the bowl to fill the tunnel of the roof, but how much time they could not guess.

The dribble rapidly swelled to a streamlet ankle deep. Their splashing progress slackened at every step. Soon they were wading in water up to their knees. The strengthening current on the long down slope all but swept them off their feet. It rose six inches. They lost their footing and together shot the last five hundred yards like a couple of logs in a mountain flume.

With a horrible jar they managed to brake themselves just before they smashed into the wall. The siphon would be full to the roof in another two minutes; water was already gushing in a six-inch stream from the lip of the orifice. Little Tom shoved Colton through. Being of bigger build than the doctor, he jammed. Colton tugged, the rising water in the siphon pushed. Between them, the doctor and the water finally got him out. A generous douche of icy water sluiced them off the spillway and sent them rolling downstream. Jostled by the huge carcasses of the gray beasts they fought their way to a landing.

Wet, bruised and miserable, they decided to call it a day and go home to the cheery camp and its blazing fire. There was no further point in spending the night where they were. Swain was safely bottled up till the siphon had done its work and emptied the bowl and passageway. They judged from their collective experience that it would take about ten or twelve hours for the bowl to empty. There would be ample time to catch Swain after tomorrow's breakfast.

AVOIDING the bodies they picked their way through the forest toward the distant glow of the campfire. No dark shape dropped from the trees to inspect them. The Captain had gone west; they were going slightly west of south.

"What the devil is that?" Colton asked suddenly. "There, to the right. Don't you see it?"

Two ellitical patches of light were slowly advancing over the bare ground between the trees. Little Tom's heart skipped a beat. Then he guessed.

"The spotlights from a pair of electric torches, of course," he answered in a matter of fact tone. Then he shouted.

In answer Lila's clear treble inquired for Dr. Colton.

"He's here. Is anybody hurt? We're coming right in."

They hastened to meet her.

Planning to rise and breakfast early they turned in. Each of the white men was assigned his spell of sentry duty to keep a lookout and see that the fire did not die down during the night. Little Tom took the first watch, his father the second, Colton the third, and Lila, because she insisted on sharing the work, took the fourth. Her wound was completely healed. The men knew now that they could trust her with their lives if

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necessary. She would not go to sleep while on duty. None of the blacks could be similarly trusted. African troops have been known to fall fast asleep while charging the enemy in a night attack.

As the night advanced the deadly, chill mists that make sleeping in the African forests a misery enveloped the camp in a swirling pall. For a radius of twenty feet around the blazing logs the fog glowed and softly changed color like a white opal; beyond the charmed sphere the fever-laden mist loomed the vast forest, black and impenetrable.

Lila's watch was half over when she was put to the test. She had just added two dry logs to the fire when, about to pick up her rifle, she glanced behind her to see exactly where she had laid it down. The crackling of the fire had drowned the stealthy tread of the cautiously approaching beast, and it had crept into the light behind her back while she mended the fire. There it towered, as gray and as silent as if it were a gigantic idol hewn from the icy mist. The shock to her nerves all but paralyzed her. She could not cry out; she could not make her fingers clutch the rifle beneath her hand; she could only stare.

The huge thing stood motionless, as if to reassure her. Slowly her fingers closed on the barrel of the rifle. The act was involuntary. She had no consciousness of her actions. The creature's eyes followed the movements of her arm. It understood. Taking one step forward it planted its enormous right foot squarely across the barrel.

Looking up in terror she saw an agonized, brutal face, covered with coarse gray hair, beseeching her for mercy. Dumb and suffering, it pointed with its right hand to its mangled left forearm. The broken bones protruded through the congealed blood and torn flesh, the perfect picture of pain.

Hypnotized by terror she stood erect and did what the creature seemed to wish. She touched the broken arm, not conscious of what she was doing. The contact brought back her senses with a rush. Instantly and fully she realized the situation. She did not scream. Her only safety, and the only safety of the sleeping men, lay in absolute silence. If the brute's hostility became aroused it could kill them all before they were fully awake. Her own rifle still lay under the beast's right foot.

Knowing the risk she took she turned her back on it and crept over to waken Colton. She shook him gently by the shoulder, whispering at the same time:

"Quiet. Don't wake the others."

He was on his feet instantly.

"Its arm is hurt," she whispered, seeing his look of horror as he took in the huge bulk of the silent brute. "It wants help."

Was this a ghastly nightmare after the day's hell? No, it was real. Lila was asking him to do something. Yes, he must go over to the beast and look at its arm. He had not yet realized that this gray giant was the Captain. Within a yard of it he knew. The knowledge turned him sick and dizzy.

Again the suffering creature pointed in silence to its injured arm. Colton's senses returned. The thing was in agony. He understood. In the pest-ridden forests of Africa it does not take many hours to set up a raging infection in an open wound. The beast was imploring human help. Well, he would help it to the best of his skill and knowledge.

"Get my instruments," he whispered to Lila. "The surgical gauze is in the smaller tin box. Bring all the antiseptics."

Without a sound she stole away to find the necessary tools for the job ahead of them. Colton went fearlessly up to the gray giant and examined the fracture as best he could in the flickering firelight. Then he went back to the fire and picked up two stout charred sticks for splints.

"Bring a tent rope and two flashlights," he ordered Lila when she returned with the instruments. "We can't do it here. The others may wake and frighten him. Then we shall be done for. Get the biggest cooking pot. There is water in the bags beside Blake's tent. Boil a potful and bring it to me. I shall be about a hundred yards down the trail—that way. Be sure that the water boils."

She crept away to do her part of the job. Colton took the giant by its uninjured am and led it out of the light down the coal blackness of the trail.

IN FIFTEEN minutes Lila followed. The pot of boiling water engaged one arm; under the other she carried the tent rope and the two electric torches. He heard her coming.

"Put down the water and turn on one of the torches. Bring me the other."

She carried out instructions to the letter.

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The doctor led the gray giant back to the pot of water and began his job. While Lila held both torches so that their light fell full on the frightful wound, Colton washed it out with hot water and antiseptics. Although the almost boiling water must have caused the creature excruciating pain it made no sound. Through all the agony it stood like a rock.

At length the doctor was ready for the surgery. How he ever performed that operation neither he nor Lila can recall. The arm was so badly fractured, and infection had already set in so deeply, that it was out of the question to save it. He amputated it six inches below the elbow. He had no ether, and no local anaesthetic. Except for the necessary sounds the operation was performed in dead silence.

Dawn turned the mist to gray pearl just as they tied the last bandage. Haggard and exhausted from the terrible ordeal, Colton glanced up at the creature's face. There was something strangely familiar and yet unfamiliar about the conformation of the bones and features. Startled, the doctor walked round the huge shape, examining the muscles and feeling the bones. He counted the ribs and such other bones as could be felt through the leaner muscles. Then he made the creature bend down so that he could examine its cranium and its teeth. Last he examined the great toe on each foot.

"Good God," he gasped, "it's a human being!"

Realizing that his friends were through, the Captain reeled off through the mist.

"Shall we tell the others?" Lila asked.

"I suppose we must, to protect his life. It wouldn't do to shoot a patient."

He sighed. "That last drenching of cyanide of mercury should help. Well, we must hope for the best. If infection sets in we must do a more thorough job next time, with properly sterilized instruments. I did not foresee that I should have to operate."

They found the camp still fast asleep. The fire was practically out. Putting on some dry wood and fanning it to a blaze Colton suggested coffee. Lila made it in a jiffy. The steaming drink revived their spirits.

"Will he come back?" she asked.

"I'll bet on it. The very best we can hope for is a severe inflammation. I don't

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

A sky monster, lapis and azure-blue, it sailed out of the heat-haze that all morning had been drifting westward from the Bay of Biscay. It startled the crew of the Rio tramp and there was a momentary scurry of grimy off-watches reaching the desk, and a great upward gape of astounded eyes. Then the second engineer, a knowledgeable man, voiced explanations.

"It'll be the airship *Magellan's Cloud* on her return voyage."

The Third spat, not disparagingly, but because the fumes of the engine-room were still in his throat. "Where to?"

"Man, you're unco' ignorant. Noo York. She's been lying off for weather at Paris nearly a week, Sparks says."

A subdued buzz and crackle. A tapping that presently ceased. High up against a cloudless sky, the airship quivered remoter in the Atlantic sunshine. The Third spat again forgetfully. "Pretty thing," he said.

The Rio tramp chugged northeastward. One or two of the crew still stood on deck, watching the aerial voyageur blend with the August sunhaze and the bubble walls of seascape till it disappeared.

And that was the last the world ever saw of the airship *Magellan's Cloud*.

They died, most of them, but three survived—survived to live in another age and another unknown land to write the history of civilization twenty million years before it happened—and show their *ancestors* the hope of a better world!

This full book-length novel by J. Leslie Mitchell, a recognized classic in the field of fantastic literature, will appear in the big December issue of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES.

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know how much pain he can stand. If he were an ordinary man he would have a very bad time after a siege like that. But the Captain is no mollycoddle. He put up a bear of a fight yesterday, although I couldn't see what it was all about. Well, any time he wishes to consult me again I'm his man. We shall be better prepared the next time he drops in."

The Blakes awoke and found the two talking.

"You got up early, Doc," Little Tom remarked. "Don't blame you; I felt like sharing Lila's watch myself."

In a few sentences Colton told them what had happened.

After a hearty breakfast they left the peachy Erasmus in charge of the safari and hurried back to the ravine. When they reached it the water was still gushing in full volume from the orifice. They could have set their watches by that natural water clock. At precisely the same minute as on the previous day the hole in the wall swallowed hard, sighed, and stopped gushing. They also sighed, for the wait beside that shambles had not been pleasant as the day advanced and the temperature rose.

Three hours after the water stopped flowing Swain appeared at the circular hole.

"There's our bird," Big Tom whispered. "What a lovely shot."

"If you hurt him," Colton snapped, "I'll hurt you in a way you won't like. That fellow is the one human being who can tell us what all this means."

He nodded down to the thick strewn corpses.

Swain was standing in the opening roaring with laughter. The sight of those mangled bodies tickled his sense of humor.

"He would have burned that ape alive," Lila reminded them, "if we had let him. I don't see anything queer about his behavior. Just what I should have expected."

Swain abruptly disappeared. In a moment he was back, climbing through the hole.

"You don't see any of the five porters who went in with him, do you?" Big Tom asked with a significant inflection. "Ten to one in anything you like they don't come out."

"I'll take you in dollars," Little Tom piped up, just as the first of the black porters appeared at the hole. Swain helped him through. The man glanced at the mangled bodies and went on indifferently with his business. To an African the dead are very dead indeed. He stood by and helped three of the remaining blacks to crawl through. The fourth handed out the rifles. Then he disappeared for a second, to bob up with the end of the steel cable in his hand. It was the end with the riveted handles. Passing it out to the others he squeezed out of the hole to join them.

"We were mistaken about those shots yesterday," Big Tom admitted, "Swain may not be as black as the devil after all. What have they at the other end of that cable? It must be heavy."

It was. The six men grasped the handles of the steel cable and began their tug of war. The spectactors understood now why it had taken Swain and his men three hours to do the fifteen hundred yards or so from the siphon bowl to the orifice. Inch by inch they heaved and panted to drag out that dead weight at the other end of the cable. Presently the small ironbound box with the steel rings in its sides hove into view at the lip of the orifice. The cable had been woven in and out through the rings, round and round the box to give it a firm grip. Putting forth all their strength the six tugged the box up and over the lip. It fell, shattering the spillway where it landed, and sending great cracks through the solid rock for a radius of ten feet.

"AH," said Big Tom, "now we're getting hot. Swain knows where there's a good supply of that interesting iron."

"Even at two and a half times the density of iron a box of the metal the size of that one couldn't crack solid rock like that," Little Tom objected. "He has found something else."

Big Tom's mouth watered. "Wait till I rob him tonight."

"You won't lug it very far. Look at those fellows tugging."

The box scraped and ploughed its course half an inch at a time down the spillway. Its trail over the solid rock was marked by a band of deep, parallel grooves where the cable and the rings cut into the granite.

"What's that?" Lila cried incautiously, pointing to a spot on the opposite side of the ravine. "There, in that big tree. Don't you see?"

Following her finger they distinctly saw

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some white object flicker behind the leaves and disappear.

"I've got it," said Colton. "You ought to recognize your own bandaging, Miss Meredith. Our friend the Captain is over there in his watchtower. Presumably he sees us too."

Whether the huge Captain sighted them or not remained undisclosed. He gave no sign of having done so. To the four watching it was difficult to believe that the enormous, shaggy creature of arboreal habits hiding in that tree was indeed a man. Colton however was sure of his facts. During the long wait for the stream to stop flowing he had spent hours examining the bodies left on the bank by yesterday's conflict. One and all they were beyond the shadow of a doubt human beings. Their stature and muscular development, huger and more massive than that of the strongest gorillas, far surpassed that of any known race of men, living or extinct.

The brain capacity, from a superficial examination, appeared to be high, at least on a par with that of the best native Africans. Yet they evidently had not yet developed speech, for yesterday's battle had been a furiously silent exhibition of dumb hatred pursued to its red end without a shout or a cry, and the huge Captain had endured tortures in silence. Their shaggy gray hair, patched and tufted all over their bodies, was unlike that of the apes or gorillas.

Colton surmised that this irregular, mangy distribution of coarse fur might be just that which would result if normal human beings were afflicted with an abnormal growth of hair. Their actions during the battle, and all through the debate preceding it had been strangely human, now that they were recalled in retrospect.

The apparent brutality of their rage was not without its human parallels among the most enlightened races of western civilization. It had merely been on a more vigorous plan in keeping with the greater size and superior strength of the combatants. The devil only knows what they might have done had they been sufficiently gifted with sentimentality to use dialectic, ballots, blessings, gabble, diplomacy, bombs, bullets and poison gases.

But it was no use carping; they had done remarkably well with the limited emotions at their command. Such was Colton's charitable verdict. As a medical man he had seen a good deal of human nature in the raw. Thinking things over he felt a shamefaced regard for the gigantic Captain. The direct way in which that just beast had settled yesterday's argument, with impartiality to all, compared favorably with the endless quibbling, shilly-shally and white-livered compromising of some less virile statesmen whom he had formerly revered. The shy regard became downright admiration.

If it came to a question of bullets between Swain and the Captain, Colton knew whose side he would favor. His one interest in the ex-missionary's welfare was the possible light which that engaging renegade might shed on the Captain's career. This interest however was intellectual, purely academic. His feelings toward the Captain on the other hand were sympathetic and warmly human. No sneak ever had a human friend, and the same holds for bigots. It is doubtful whether an individual of either species was ever respected by a decent dog.

Colton's theory was soon to be put to a crucial test. It was the Captain himself who neatly presented the dilemma and forced the doctor to choose his horn.

With a crash of breaking branches the gigantic Captain dropped from his tree. It was a clumsy performance. The injured arm spoiled his style. His legs, however, were still as active as a flea's, and his tremendous right arm was in perfect shape. In one bound he reached the edge of the ravine and stood looking down on the six men straining at the steel cable. The iron clamped box was now well clear of the spillway.

Swain saw the enemy. With a yell of terror he let go his hold of the cable and ran for his rifle. The Captain let him run. Colton cocked the trigger of his rifle and waited.

"If Swain tries to shoot the Captain," he said quietly, "I shall break his arm."

The Captain was jut going into action. He selected one of the small black stones from the pile at his feet, took careful aim at the iron-bound box, and let fly with all his terrific strength. The box was smashed like an egg. So far as the spectators could see from their position on the edge the box was empty. But they had no time for surprise or speculation. The Captain had already nailed the first of the black porters. Swain, out of sight behind a rock, was cracking away, trying to get a line on the Captain. The

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giant paid not the slightest attention. One after the other, with incredible speed and accuracy he broke the necks of the four fleeing blacks.

The firing ceased. Swain was maneuvering for a better position. The Captain stood looking down at the crushed box. Presently he made up his mind. Like a huge gray spider descending a wall he climbed down into the ravine. Reaching the shattered box he kicked the fragments aside. Then he squatted and began a systematic search with his hand.

WHILE the Captain was thus engaged Swain broke cover, his rifle at the shoulder. He was about to pull the trigger when Lila, involuntarily, screamed. Colton's rifle was already covering Swain's arm.

Both the Captain and Swain glanced up. Seeing Colton, Swain began to curse. The Captain went on with his search.

"Come out of there!" Colton yelled. "Come on! We'll protect you."

Swain's answer was a steelnosed bullet that zipped through the tree above them, severing a small limb.

"Come on, you idiot, before he attacks you. Can't you see he has only one sound arm? You can beat him to the top."

With a snarl of hatred Swain collapsed to all fours. His rifle clattered from his hands and he hopped like a toad toward the wall of the ravine. Interrupting his search for two seconds the Captain reached round, picked up Swain's rifle by its muzzle, swung it once round his head without rising from his squatting position, and smashed it like a toy on the rocks. He flung away the barrel and resumed his search.

Swain, snarling like a mad ape, swarmed his way up the side of the ravine. Reaching the top he came bounding on all fours toward Colton.

"Shall we shoot?" Big Tom shouted.

"No! Take him alive."

Then began a terrible battle. Colton's rifle was snatched from his hands, twisted into a steel knot, and pitched over the cliff. Big Tom's followed, and Little Tom, having missed his swing at the maniac's head, involuntarily surrendered his weapon. Lila fired, but missed. Swain grasped her rifle by the muzzle, wrenched it from her hands; and made a wild swipe at Colton.

"Run!" the doctor shouted.

It was their one chance. Swain tried to rise erect to a human posture but immediately collapsed to all fours. Knuckling after them like an ape, Swain pursued, slowly gaining. They separated. Swain followed Colton. The others rallied to distract the infuriated half-man's attention, but Swain refused to be misled. Dodging around trees, behind rocks, in and out of the sparse scrub. Colton kept just ahead.

Help arrived not a second too soon. The Captain had found what he sought among the fragments of the box. Striding through the forest he advanced to join the battle. His right arm hung straight down by his side. The huge fist was tightly clenched as if carrying a great weight.

Swain saw him just as he emerged from behind a tree in his mad pursuit of Colton. The sudden shock brought him to his senses. With a yell of terror he straightened up and became a human being. A look of amazed pain flashed across his face; he had become a man.

"Save me!" he shrieked, and started to run. "For God's sake shoot him!"

How could they? Swain had pitched away their useless rifles.

"I am innocent!" the wretched man screamed as he tried in vain to climb a tree. "Save me! Kill him!"

The Captain gently kicked him free of his frenzied hold on the tree. A second mild kick hurled him to the ground. Colton and Lila, thinking they could bend the giant's cold fury, sprang toward him. He brushed them aside and planted his foot on the writhing man. Colton grasped the arm which he had dressed, hoping to awaken memory and pity. The huge gray brute shook him off. Then, raising his right arm with the stupendous weight which it carried, he held his fist above Swain's skull, taking careful aim before dropping the weight.

That small, infinitely hard lump of metal in his hand would shear through bone and brain faster than any bullet, for it was the thing for which the Captain had searched among the fragments of Swain's box. Six men had strained every muscle of their backs, legs and arms to drag that lump, no bigger than a walnut, half an inch at a time over the smooth rocks of the channel.

THE Captain's over-caution in aiming robbed him of his revenge. Guessing instinctively that the writhing thing beneath the Captain's foot would be slain when that huge hand opened, but how she

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could not guess, Lila hurled herself upon the hand. Her body came between the unopened fist and Swain's head. Looking down on the sunlit gold of her hair, the gigantic Captain seemed to remember. Did he reason? If he unclenched his fist this small creature who had helped to ease his distress must be crushed and mangled if not killed outright. Brushing her off by a slight, quick movement of his arm he stepped back, swung his arm once in a wide circle, and let drive. The small nut of metal sank like a slug from a high powered rifle into the trunk of a tree. The Captain strode off, gray and gigantic, through the forest toward the west. He had let his enemy live. Why?

Swain scrambled to his feet, looked about him, and started on a run for the ravine.

"Stop him!" Colton shouted.

But the fugitive knew the easiest and quickest path down. As they reached the bottom they saw him disappearing into the circular hole.

"He's gone back for more," Big Tom guessed.

"Yes, and he has no light," Colton agreed. "There's his torch, lying over there by the wreckage of the box. Lila, you and Little Tom go up and bring down two of our torches. He and I are going to follow Swain. Big Tom will stay with you tonight."

When they returned with the torches, Colton gave them their last instructions.

"The Captain's arm is badly swollen. If he comes back for treatment, soak off the bandages with hot water and wash the wound thoroughly with antiseptics as I did last night. See that your own hands are clean before you touch his arm. Keep a sharp lookout for him and head him off before the natives catch sight of him. Is everything clear?"

"Quite," she answered.

"Very well. We shall try to be back in time to get out at the next intermission of the spring after tonight's. That will be sometime tomorrow afternoon."

Colton and Little Tom hurried away to enter the long tunnel of the siphon. Big Tom and Lila climbed out of the shambles to return to camp.

"Why did the Captain spare Swain?" she asked. "You say it is easy to dissect motives. Try that one."

Big Tom laughed. "It is only human motives that are easy. I haven't grown accustomed yet to thinking of our big friend as a human being. But I'm willing to try my hand on his case, just to keep it limber.

"First, he is not civilized. Therefore he is direct, honest and simple. Being all these he will openly seek his own advantage without pretense, decent or indecent. That is the first point. The background for the second is that you helped Colton to doctor his broken arm. You pleased him by relieving pain. Does a man in agony throw away the opiate? Does he risk smashing the bottle? No. The Captain regards you as part of the opiate, or at least the label on the bottle. Probably he does not reason, but only makes a train of vivid associations.

"In your case the train runs like this: pain, yellow hair, less pain. He watched you helping Colton. There is probably another train in his mind something like this: yellow hair, girl, man, pain, less pain. Seeing you in danger and closely associated with a man, also in danger, he sensed that to destroy both of you would be equivalent to making his arm sore. He may not have been sure about Swain, but he would take no chance of breaking the magic chain of yellow hair, girl, man, pain, less pain. So both you and that rotten skunk escaped."

Lila was about to answer when a twig cracked behind them. Wheeling round they faced the gigantic Captain. They were not afraid; he was holding out his bandaged stump. Lila laughed.

"Your theory is proved. You are the 'man' of the chain this time. As Dr. Colton appointed me head surgeon in his absence, will you run to camp and bring me the necessary things? Bring the pot full of water. We shall build a fire here."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Why should I be? The Captain wouldn't break the magic chain for all the world. I am as safe with him as a nurse with a paralytic."

"I believe you are right. I shall be back in twelve minutes."

As he hurried away she walked coolly up to the Captain and began removing the outer bandages.

CHAPTER VI

THEIR SLAVE

THE vast bowl of the intermittent spring was but half full when Colton and Little Tom reached it. There was no sign of Swain. He could have hidden in the pitch darkness within

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a yard of their spotlights without fear of discovery if he held his breath. Listening intently they heard neither breathing nor footfall, only the steady, hollow drumming of the water pouring into the bowl.

"Shall we go on?" Little Tom asked. "The chances are that he will return to the place where he got his metal or whatever it was."

"I'm not so sure of that. If the stuff is rare and valuable he may try to lead us astray. He must have heard us coming up the siphon. Still, I see nothing else to do."

"Well, the trail is plain enough, any way," Little Tom returned, as he led off, his spotlight following the deep grooves made in the rock by the box which Swain and his men had dragged out.

The grooves led round a narrow shelf on the left of the bowl, slightly above high water mark. For about half a mile the two men walked rapidly ahead, following the grooves. They were now almost a quarter of the way round the circumference of the bowl. The water lay to their left, a rock wall fissured and pitted by small, eroded caves to their right. The path rose slightly, taking them about twelve feet above the rising level of the water.

"*Look out!*"

Colton's shout was too late. Swain, crouched in one of the caves, had leaped upon them from behind, snatched Coltons' torch, and knocked Little Tom into the water. The maniac extinguished the torch and dived. Little Tom rose first.

"Catch my torch," he gasped, flinging it up on the path. It was a bad shot. In the dark it was impossible to judge a twelve-foot, vertical throw with any accuracy. The torch landed on the rock pathway, smashed the lens and ricochetted with a splash into the icy water.

"I'll get the other," he spluttered.

Colton was helpless. Then he remembered his matches.

"*Come back!*" he shouted. "I'll find a landing place and give you a light."

But Little Tom was well on his way, guided by the splashing of Swain. Little Tom had the advantage of two free hands. This however was not as great as might appear. Swain had lived for twenty years in the Congo forest and knew its rivers as intimately as any black fisherman. He swam like a rat.

Colton's matches showed him nothing but a black wall of darkness and a flashing ripple or two. The next half hour was the worst in his life. What would he tell the boy's father if he were drowned? Rather than face that task he would plunge into the water himself.

Little Tom overhauled Swain before they reached a landing. His first act was to seize the electric torch in Swain's left hand. Then began a terrific struggle in those black waters. Fighting like the madman he was, Swain tried to reach his adversary's throat with his right hand while treading water to keep afloat. They sank, both clinging to the torch. Breathless and clawing at each other they rose, to sink again.

Under water Little Tom tried for a knockout, and got it. With his doubled fist he hit Swain with all his strength full in the stomach. The hand on the torch relaxed and the senseless body shot like a bladder to the surface. Little Tom swam up after it. Reaching the surface he had just sufficient strength left to grab Swain by the hair and tread water. By a supreme effort he managed to slip the torch into his shirt as he and Swain sank.

Still clutching Swain's hair with one hand he swam up with the other and his legs. Once more on the surface he turned Swain face up and swam with him toward what he judged was the direction of the wall. In the sheer darkness he could not know whether he was making progress or swimming in a circle.

Far off to the left he spied a tiny yellow spark. It was one of Colton's matches. The doctor had run round the path and found a landing place. The spark died. Little Tom shouted. Another spark sprang into life, and he shouted again. When, towing the deadweight of Swain's body, he reached the landing, he had but about two more strokes left in him. Colton pulled them out.

"All right?" he asked.

"I am," Little Tom panted. "The torch." He took it from his shirt and handed it to Colton. "Is Swain dead?"

The doctor switched on the light and examined Swain.

"He's all right. I'll roll him."

By rolling and artificial respiration they brought him to.

"Coming with us?" Colton asked when the dazed wretch finally understood where he was.

His answer was a snarl.

"All right, then. Stay here while we explore your interesting caves. It's a good

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thing this torch was specially manufactured for the tropics," he said, "or your foolishness with it in the water would have put it strictly on the hog. So you're not coming? We'll pick you up on the way back. Don't try any of your monkey surprises on us next time. If you are not within ten feet of this spot when we return we shall beat the life out of you. Understand? How about your clothes, Little Tom? Aren't you cold?"

"Of course I'm cold."

"Then take off your duds till they dry out a bit. Come on, I'll set a fast pace. Shed your shirt as you go."

"It's shed," Little Tom announced presently. "Five seconds halt for the next act. All right; go ahead. Don't look back. I'm modest, even in the dark."

"We may be in a subterranean maze, for all I know," the doctor remarked cheerfully. "But don't get panicky. We can't miss a trail like this. I passed a dozen galleries on my way round the bowl. This one is the only one of the lot with the deep scratches on its floor. They must have dragged the box along this way."

THE gallery down which they were passing broadened rapidly into a vast chamber. The grooved scratches followed the left wall. The spotlight, dancing in a long ellipse over the floor before them, just grazed some grayish white object lying slightly to the right of their path.

"Let's investigate," Little Tom suggested. "We have lots of time. That torch is good for fifty hours yet."

The grayish patch proved to be the ashes of a wood fire. Round about it lay the bones of several small animals, evidently the refuse of a forgotten feast.

"I wish I knew more about snakes and things," Colton sighed, lovingly reaching for one of the larger bones. "Then I could say what the long departed guests had for dinner that evening. Hullo! It must have been longer ago than last week."

The bone crumbled to dust at his touch.

"This grows interesting. I shan't wreck another specimen by my clumsiness. Let us see if the diners registered their names on the walls of this hotel."

"By gum they did!" Colton exclaimed as his spotlight picked out the first splash of color on the wall. It was a lifelike outline drawing in red and black of some horned animal at full gallop.

"Ever see a beast like that?"

"No, nor the picture of one. Try another."

One by one the light revealed strangely alive pictures of animals in action. So far as either of the men knew—and they were fairly well informed, both being educated in science—not one of those animals had roamed the earth within the memory of man. Either they were pure fabrications of the dead and forgotten artist's imagination, or they represented portraits from memory of beasts which the artist had observed in life and motion. The simplicity, quiet strength and naturalness of the poses proclaimed the pictures as masterpieces of fact, not of fancy.

"This is the greatest find yet of prehistoric art," Colton exclaimed. "I'll let Swain dance jigs on me if he likes for getting us into this."

"I thought I saw the beginning of some more just outside the last patch of light."

They moved on, following the wall with the spotlight.

"There are more," Colton announced in a tone of awe. "This time the artist let his imagination loose."

A dense, uniform wash of some blue pigment formed the background. Against this was represented with startling skill a shower of meteors in what looked like gold. Five vivid splashes of red on a green band below the blue represented the fall of five meteors either on a plain or in a forest. A sixth splash, redder and much larger than the others, on a dazzling white ground, symbolized the fall of the main mass either on a desert or in a lake.

There could be no mistaking the intent of the picture. It was a masterpiece of simple, historical picture writing. A small crescent of silver or meteoric iron fastened by some invisible means to the stone indicated the moon. Eight small dots of the same metal, distributed over the blue background in a perfect design, told the story that the memorable shower of meteors had fallen in the night. The whole picture formed as complete and as graphic a record of a forgotten night of splendor as any man or race of men has left to the world.

Although they searched carefully for further pictures they found only one. This was a huge, cloud-like mass of dense black. There was something inexpressibly sinister about this unformed, somberly suggestive symbol.

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"What was he trying to do here, do you suppose?" Colton muttered. "I don't like it. It is like a madman's conception of a nightmare. The very outline of the thing is evil."

"Perhaps that's what he meant it to be," Little Tom said, laughing uneasily, "a picture of evil. If so, he hit it off to a T."

There had been not the slightest attempt anywhere to represent the human figure. Feeling a strange sense of fatigue the men continued following Swain's trail. Presently they came upon a huge block of black stone. The grooves in the floor curved round it and went further on into the darkness. Playing the light on the black mass, Colton discovered half a dozen splashes of brighter metal, like steel. They were steel, in fact flattened rifle bullets.

"What in thunder was Swain trying to do here?" he puzzled. "That lump looks anything but lively."

"My guess is that he was trying to chip off a chunk," Little Tom hazarded. "That explains the shots we heard yesterday."

THEY examined the steel splattered over the rock. So far as they could judge the bullets had done no more damage than raindrops. The dense black surface was unflaked and without a scratch.

"That trick didn't work," Colton commented, "so they went on to find some of the stuff lying about loose. Well, we shall follow and see where they got the pill in that heavy box of theirs. Don't you find walking difficult?"

"My feet won't come up. I feel as if my shoes were full of lead."

"Mine too. Want to go back?"

"No, let us keep on, now that we've come this far. Besides, I think the heavy feeling is getting better. I walk a little easier now, don't you?"

"Quite a bit. What the devil—" The doctor stopped short. "I've lost the heel of my right shoe."

"That's nothing. There goes the sole of my left. Confound it! That was my watch that smashed just now. There must be a hole in my pocket."

"Your watch was ruined, anyway," Colton comforted, "after your swim."

"Mind the torch!" Little Tom yelled, "you're going to drop it."

By a desperate juggling feat Colton retained his hold on the precious torch.

"What's the matter with me, anyway? I have no more strength than a cat. This thing seems to weigh a ton."

"Let me carry it a spell." Colton handed over the torch. Little Tom all but dropped it. "Why," he exclaimed, "it does weigh more than it did."

"You're crazy. We had better get out of here before we go clean off our nuts."

"Nothing doing. I've got a firm grip on the light. Come on and see what it's all about. Swain's tracks still say straight ahead. I'm as good a man as he is."

"There goes my other heel," Colton snapped with considerable irritation. "Hang it! I've lost the soles of both shoes too," he announced as he stepped off and left the soles behind him.

"Same here," Little Tom replied genially. "Now we're on a basis of democratic equality. Let's see what the cause of it is."

He picked up one of the discarded soles and examined it by the spotlight. All the nails had been as neatly drawn as if by a pair of pincers.

"Any suggestions to offer?" Colton asked dryly.

"Plenty. There may be a dense acid gas hanging about the floor."

"Sounds like gas to me."

"I didn't say there was, I said there might be. As a matter of fact I don't think there is."

"Then what do you think?"

"Why, the thing is easy. Don't you see it? We are walking over a floor of solid magnetite—natural magnet, lodestone, you know—of extraordinary magnetic intensity. Haven't you ever seen them lifting tons of scrap iron with an electromagnet? Well, that is what is happening to all the iron on us, only it is the other way about. The magnet below us is pulling the iron down instead of lifting it up."

"You needn't be so darned explicit," the doctor retorted. "I'm not a dumb idiot."

"Don't get fresh. Remember I have the light."

"Yes and I'll bet you drop it before long if you keep waving it about."

"Can't help wobbling it a bit. This tremendous magnet under us keeps pulling at the iron works of the thing."

"There is precious little iron in that flashlight. Not more than eight ounces, at the most."

"That shows how strong a magnetic field we are standing on. This torch

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here feels as if it weighed forty pounds."

"And where did this precious natural magnet of yours come from?"

"Heaven," Little Tom replied promptly. "Fell out of the sky. The thing we are walking over is probably one of those meteors the artist back there was trying to commemorate. Lots of meteors are nearly a hundred per cent pure metal, and most of it iron. This one must have been one of the biggest that ever hit our wandering earth."

"So that's your theory, is it? Well, I'm going to disprove it while you put on your clothes. They should be fairly dry by now. I happen to have a small magnetic compass as a watchcharm at the end of my chain. Put down that torch before you drop it!"

Little Tom laid the torch flat and proceeded to dress. Colton carefully unfastened the small gold charm from his watch chain, noticing incidentally that his patch pocket sagged as if it were full of bricks. The compass had only a very small needle, so he could not be sure whether its apparently normal weight was a fact or a false alarm. Anyway, the whole compass seemed to weigh no more than it did ordinarily.

"Now if your theory is right," he said, "and if this black stuff beneath us really is a huge natural magnet, it should affect the needle of this compass. That's right, isn't it?"

"Your conclusion is sufficient but not necessary," Little Tom disagreed. "The needle will be affected if this is merely iron, and not magnetized at all."

"You're crazy. If this is a magnet it will have poles, and another magnet, like this compass needle will tend to set in a definite direction according to the position in which I hold it. Now watch."

Colton held the compass in the light and slowly turned it into every conceivable position. The needle never budged from true north, with not the slightest suspicion of dip.

"That knocks your theory on the head," he said. "This is neither a magnet nor iron beneath us. Come through with a second theory."

Little Tom was crestfallen. "I'll wait till I can perform some experiments."

"And wait some more. No, you won't explain this in a hurry."

"Even at that I've got nothing on you. What about Swain and all those human gorillas or whatever they are? You're a doctor and an anatomist. You ought to be able to explain at least Swain and our friend the Captain."

"And I'm going to explain them," Colton retorted, "if I have to stand the African continent on its head to do it. Well, have you got your pants on yet?"

THEY were nearly at the end of Swain's trail. The rock floor began to curve sharply up in a huge mound, for all the world like an enormous boil. Cracks and deep fissures radiating from the still invisible crest of the mound gave it the appearance of a dead volcano, but this was no volcano that they were ascending. The irresistible conviction gripped them that some growth, of tremendous power, was slowly forcing its way up through the solid rock like a gigantic mushroom.

"Your meteor," Colton remarked, "seems to be coming up from the core of the earth to have a look at what it hit."

They had reached the top. The flashlight showed a huge nub of shiny black metal protruding from the cracked rock, while all about it lay coarse granules of the same mysterious metal. These granules varied in size from a grapefruit to a pea. Swain and his men had dragged out one of the walnut-sized lumps. This size appeared to be the commonest.

"The main mass is slowly disintegrating as it forces its way up through the rock," Little Tom observed.

He was probably right. A close examination of the huge nub showed it to be a dense, kidneylike structure of innumerable rounded bodies, not unlike the formation of meerschaum. Colton bent down and tried to pick up one of the smallest granules of the metal. He could not budge it. That insignificant, shiny black pea stuck to its bed as if riveted to the spot. Strain and try as he would he could not budge it a hairsbreadth. Straightening up he absentmindedly gave the obstinate pea a terrific kick, to realize immediately that his shoes now had no soles. Hopping and swearing he voted for a return to a saner world. Little Tom seconded the motion, and they limped back over the rock floor to look for Swain.

They were not surprised to find that Swain had skipped out. After a short council of war they decided to work their way cautiously round the edge of the bowl and ascertain whether it was yet full. At the head of the siphon they could wait until it drained. The exploration had taken much less time than

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they had anticipated. There might yet be a chance of beating the water to the circular hole.

They doused the light and felt their way around the rock path, guiding by the feel of the wall. They made no sound, as they were walking on the bare soles of their feet. It was somewhat risky passing the caves and galleries branching off into the heart of the rock, for of necessity they lost touch with the wall. However, by bearing constantly toward the side of the wall they avoided a plunge into the bowl. If Swain was in one of those caves he either did not hear the soft fall of their feet above the steady drumming of the waterfall, or he was waiting a better chance.

At the entrance to the siphon they found the water already flowing over the lip. The rapidly rising stream was about six inches deep. To risk a race with it down the fifteen hundred yards or more to the circular opening would be courting certain death. From their previous experience they knew that in a very few minutes the bowl would be emptying its waters through the siphon like a city sewer in flood time. They sat down to wait. They had just missed their opportunity by a matter of minutes.

"We stopped too long looking at those pictures," Colton growled. "Serves us right. Now—"

A snarling shape brushed past them in the dark and darted splashing into the rapidly rising water.

"Come back, you fool!" they shouted. "You can't beat it."

But the half crazed man did not hear them. Or if he did he had other plans. Possibly he figured that it would be easier to destroy his enemies at the other end of the siphon. It would be so easy to knock them on the head as they looked out of the circular hole. He could get the first one that way, and stand by till the next gushing of the intermittent spring forced out or drowned the other like a rat in a drain. Either way he would be rid of both the spies. Then he could continue his researches or his deviltry undisturbed by prying fools.

His arithmetic was correct enough. One dead fool plus another do make precisely two dead fools. But there was a radical defect in his higher mathematics. He had forgotten the rather abstruse laws of fluid motion. The two men shouted themselves hoarse. All the answer they got was a prodigious splashing as the fugitive wallowed his way along the rapidly rising water in the tunnel. If he had sense enough left to lie down and swim, the siphon might vomit him out at the small end like a fish.

The two composed themselves for their long dreary vigil in the dark.

"What's the matter with me, Doc?" Little Tom asked suddenly. "I feel half drunk."

"You've got me," the doctor replied thickly. "Ever since we left that lump of metal I've been feeling queer myself."

"How does it affect you?"

"Like a jag in its first stages."

"Same here. Let's sing."

"I'll be damned if I do. But I wouldn't mind going back and having another look at that lump of metal. What do you say? Shall we try it?"

Little Tom kept his head. He had tasted alcohol several times in his life in one form or another, and was perfectly familiar with its effects. His present exhilaration was exactly like the sudden rise in spirits induced by a good stiff cocktail or two. But Little Tom was one of those comparatively rare young men who can refuse a third drink just when they are feeling happiest after a second.

"No," he said with a short laugh. "I hate a headache. Suppose we stay here till we sober up."

"You're right," Colton muttered. "There's something wrong with that rotten metal. I begin to understand Swain, poor devil. The effect is something like that of cocaine. I have an absurd feeling of content and general well being. All is right with the world, ha, ha! I am the King of Siam!"

"You're drunk. Shut up."

"No, I'm not. Never was soberer in my life. Did I ever tell you about that operation for a tumor I did just after I got out of medical college? No? You ought to hear it. Listen!"

"I don't want to hear it! Shut up."

"I'm bragging like a fool," Colton continued, "but I can't help myself. Gee, I feel great! Come on; let's go back and have another look at the pictures."

"You stay here," Little Tom said firmly, making a sudden grab in the dark for his hilarious friend. "I'm crazy too, but I still have sense enough to keep away from the bar. Enough is enough, and that's all there is to it. Gosh, I hope this rotten stuff doesn't leave a headache."

Colton struggled to get free. In the mixup that followed Little Tom had all

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that he could do to hold the other down.

"Cut it out or I'll knock you cold," he warned. "I mean business."

And he did. For greater safety he turned Colton face down and sat on his back. Presently the doctor began to snore. In five minutes both the men were fast asleep.

When Colton awoke, sobered and sore, he toppled Little Tom off his back and painfully stood up. The water had ceased flowing down the siphon. Now was their chance to escape. Giving Little Tom a vigorous shake he ordered an advance.

"I feel as if I had been on a jamboree," Little Tom confessed.

"The same here. Well, one good thing has come out of it all. I understand Swain better than I did before. He must have been an addict for years. Poor devil, I shall be easier on him after this."

But it was too late. Jammed fast against the ledge below the circular window they found Swain's lifeless body. He had tried to swim the current, and failed.

IT was an awesome sight that met their eyes as they disengaged Swain's body and stared out on the ravine. It was mid afternoon. Three huge pyres of logs and brush crackled and roared toward the sky. Along the banks of the ravine the trees had been felled and toppled down onto the rocks. Thus fuel was obtained for the necessary task and the danger of a forest fire obviated.

"Who did all that?" Little Tom asked in puzzled wonder.

"And how on earth did they get it done in so short a time?"

The "short time," they learned presently, was two days and nights. They had slept longer than they guessed, drugged by a poison to which their undegenerated bodies were new. As they watched the mystery was in part explained. A gigantic, familiar figure came striding down the ravine from the narrows, dragging something after it. The Captain was cleaning up. With a single swing of his tremendous right arm he hurled the gray body twenty feet straight into the reddest part of the pyre. That was being done which was necessary. No Greek hero could have asked for a nobler funeral.

The Captain spied them as they descended the spillway. For a second he shaded his eyes with his hand. Then like a walking colossus he strode toward them, huge, gray and menacing.

"What now?" Colton muttered uneasily. "Shall we bolt for the tunnel again?"

"No chance. Where are the others? He can't have cut down those trees, nor can he have lit the fires."

Like an executioner striding to the block the Captain advanced toward them. With horror they saw him bend down and pick up one of the small back stones which had slain one of the gray beast men.

"I swear I won't tell," Colton said firmly. "Good-by. We've had a good time together anyway while it lasted. Sorry I got you into this."

Instinct got the better of Little Tom. He turned and bolted for the bank. Colton caught the panic and followed. A shrill scream from the top announced the arrival of Lila. A second later Big Tom shouted with all his lungs at the Captain. The stern giant glanced up, noted his friends, and continued his pursuit. The two men were clambering up the side of the ravine with the agility of monkeys. To the astonishment of Lila and Big Tom the Captain stopped in his tracks, making no attempt to follow the fugitives. They saw something like curiosity or speculation pass over the giant's face as he watched every movement of the two men. When they reached the top the Captain dropped his missile and followed in a leisurely fashion.

"What shall we do now?" Colton panted.

"Stay here," Lila answered quietly. "I can managed him."

She dived behind a tree and reappeared with a large bottle of carbolic and a roll of surgical gauze.

"He always comes like a lamb for this," she explained. "It is about time anyway to change the outer dressings."

The Captain stalked toward the silent, apprehensive group. Lila went to meet him, making the most of her peace offering. The gaunt gray giant noted her offering, glanced at his bandaged arm, hesitated a fraction of a second, and decided in the negative. He was not going to have his arm dressed just yet, although the idea appealed to him as pleasant and sensible. No; he had other, more immediate business in hand.

Making a grab for Colton's shirt he ripped it off the doctor's back. Then, after a vigorous shaking, he put one foot on the garment, and with his hand tore it to shreds.

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Although Lila and Big Tom pummelled his back and chest he continued with his investigation. The two were just a pair of annoying flies, to be shaken off with a shrug if they became too persistent. Little Tom and the doctor added their protests, but unavailingly. The Captain made a careful search of every rag of Colton's shirt.

The next must be passed over lightly. A quick grab, a sudden ripping and rending, and the doctor was minus his trousers. Lila fled. Little Tom was about to follow when he was sharply called back, leaving his shirt in the giant's grasp. Then he too was expeditiously peeled. Their sorry shoes next received the Captain's attention. With remarkable dexterity the Captain ripped the laces with one powerful finger and removed the remnants of what, not three days ago, were two fine pairs of stout tramping boots.

WITH the spoils of war all his the Captain proceeded to examine his trophies. The electric torch, Little Tom's knife, his pipe and his metal match safe came in for their share of attention, but were soon cast aside. The doctor's watch, long since stopped, was also discarded. So far the inspector had discovered no contraband. Luckily Colton had left the splinter of meteoric iron, which he had rifled from Swain's effects, with his baggage at camp. For it was beginning to dawn on them what the Captain was seeking. They thanked their stars that they had brought back with them no souvenirs from the cave. But then they could not have carried any of the forbidden metal anyway. Almost cheerfully they watched the Captain as he systematically tore their garments to shreds and searched every rag.

At last he was satisfied. Without further ceremony he departed in search of Lila and her bottle. He found her not far away behind a tree. Roaring with laughter Big Tom went to Lila's assistance. The two victims made their ignominious way back to camp for a complete change of clothes.

That evening they learned the origin of the pyres. For obvious reasons Big Tom had decided that something must be done. Rounding up the lazy blacks under the nominal leadership of Erasmus, he began to fell trees and cut them up into manageable firewood. While they were engaged in this, the Captain appeared on one of his periodical visits to have his arm dressed.

The blacks naturally fled. By a judicious display of firearms Lila and Big Tom corralled them and, through the stammering Erasmus, introduced them to the Captain. While Lila attended to the Captain's arm, Big Tom kept the blacks from bolting up the trees. Seeing the white girl fearlessly commercing with the gray giant, the porters lost some of their fear, although they expressed through Erasmus their conviction that the devil at last had got them. Through the interpreter Big Tom assured them that they were right, and that unless they immediately resumed the work of cutting firewood, and really put their backs to it this time, the devil would surely give them hell. They fell to with a will, easily breaking the African record, or the Scandinavian for that matter, in felling trees.

Instead of disappearing into the forest immediately after his needs were attended to, as had been his custom, the Captain hung about watching the fun. He soon got the drift of the game. Presently he was in it with both legs and his one good arm. He tore the fallen trees to pieces as if they were nothing tougher than bunches of celery. Then, running out of hewn trees, he nonchalantly stripped off branches from the smaller trees yet standing, while the blacks dragged away the litter and pitched it down into the ravine. Seeing that they wanted a clearance along the edges of the ravine he assisted by pushing over such trees as he could master. The rest had to be cut half through.

When it became necessary to collect dry wood as a base for the pyres, he saw the point immediately and went in search of logs, dead branches and the like along the bed of the stream. The actual lighting of the fires gave him a real thrill. He followed Big Tom and Lila from place to place watching in dumb fascination the tiny yellow flame of a match grow like magic into a roaring red dragon. As they lit the last pile of tinder he held out his hand for the match box. They let him have it. For perhaps three minutes he rattled it, stared at it, and turned it over and over in his fingers, trying to think. Lila gently took it from him and showed him how it worked by striking a match. He watched her like a dying man staring at his soul. But his memory, if he ever had possessed one, was dead beyond hope.

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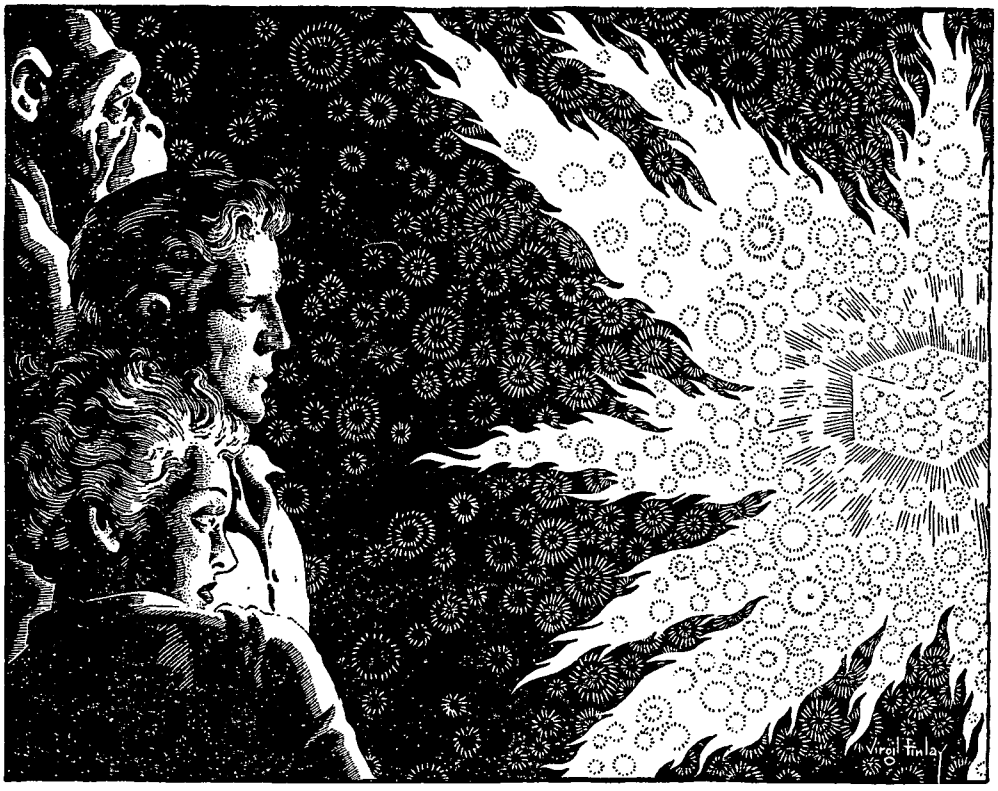

The whole block of metal was now a threatening, coruscating dazzle of purplish white flame, gleaming and scintillating like a million stars

When the repulsive part of the necessary work came to be done it was the Captain who performed it single handed after seeing from their efforts what was required. Colton and Little Tom had witnessed the last of it. The forest was now once more habitable.

"How is his arm coming along?" Colton asked.

"All right, I think," Lila answered. "The swelling is all down. You can see for yourself tomorrow morning. He always comes just before daylight."

"Then he remembers the first time," Colton said.

"I don't think so, necessarily," Big Tom objected. "The more I watch him the less I believe in memory or in the mind. He is simply a bundle of behavior like the rest of us. His coming here at fixed times is merely the urge of similar circumstances—light, temperature, physical feelings, and so on. Probably he actually *remembers* nothing from one day to the next."

"It all depends upon what you mean by 'memory,'" Colton argued.

"I mean anything rather than the bosh they used to teach us in psychology. But I won't argue with you, for I know you are just as sound a mechanist as I am. You also believe in behaviorism against sentimentality."

"I believe in nothing whatever," the doctor asserted with some heat. "Belief is for men like Swain."

"And do you believe," Little Tom asked, "that we shall ever get to the bottom of all our wild doings?"

"I shan't stop till we do," Colton answered quietly. "It may be difficult now that Swain is dead. Nevertheless I intend to do my darnedest."

They fell silent, thinking of the wretched man whose strange passion had wrecked his life. How could they know what he had suffered? They had seen only his worst side, long after he had ceased to be responsible for his actions. What did they know of his fight against temptation? Or how did they know that he had been wholly to blame for his downfall? It is hard to hate the dead, or to despise them.

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"Does anyone happen to have a prayer book or anything of the sort in his kit?" Colton asked presently.

"I have one," Lila replied. She rose to fetch it.

"I'll get a shovel," Little Tom said, "and have things ready."

"All right. We may as well give the poor chap the sort of a burial he would have asked twenty years ago."

Before leaving the lonely grave under the stars they fixed a crude cross made of two sticks at its head. Swain slept as he would have wished to sleep before the madness made him what he was. They walked silently back to camp and went to bed.

THE next two weeks passed swiftly in a determined attack upon the many apparently inexplicable mysteries of their surroundings. Big Tom unpacked his half ton of "junk" and set to work on a detailed examination of the black-peppered stones which the Captain and others had used in battle.

Beyond a doubt the substance responsible for the black spots was a metal and, but for its most peculiar characteristic, common iron. Its weight, however, exceeded several times that of any iron known. From its structure it was not, like Swain's splinter, meteoric iron. It was flaked over and veined through the stone precisely as ordinary iron ore rich in oxides of iron is veined and flaked. Big Tom formed his first theory: some unknown agency had converted all the common iron oxides in the vicinity into a pure metal, not an oxide, practically identical with iron except for its extraordinary density.

The most interested spectator of Big Tom's researches—if one omits the sociable millions of winged stinging and biting insets—was the gigantic Captain. For hours he would stand or squat entranced while Big Tom weighed, measured and X-rayed his mineral specimens. All this seemed to fascinate him and give him an intense esthetic pleasure. The fuming acids and more noisome chemicals which Big Tom brought into play were less to his taste. He would cough, sneeze and express his disgust in a peculiar way, fitting but unmentionable.

Big Tom and the Captain struck up an intimate friendship with the most cordial feelings of goodwill on both sides. Although the Captain could not talk, nevertheless he and Big Tom managed quite well to exchange ideas. The huge, shaggy giant seemed to follow the progress of the experiments with genuine intelligence. In one respect he proved himself a most valuable aid. Big Tom, although quite strong, was wholly unable to move many of the black-peppered specimens which he wished to analyze. Their weight was too much for one man or for twenty. The Captain fished them up with his huge hand like nuts from a bowl and deposited them as delicately as eggs on the hard, massive rock which was his friend's work bench. When Big Tom wished to have the specimen turned the Captain performed the delicate operation with mathematical precision.

If, as frequently happened, the experimenter wished to see what the inside of a specimen looked like, the Captain would carry it away to his own workshop, a large flat boulder of the black mineral surrounded by several smaller stones peppered with black. The flat one was his anvil, the small ones his sledges. It was a case of diamond cut diamond. Nothing less massive than a lump of the strange substance could have fractured one of those black-peppered stones, and only the Captain was powerful enough to lift one of the smaller lumps to drop it on the specimen.

It was the Captain who flaked and ground a pea of the black metal to powder so that Big Tom could analyze minute specks of the substances. Anything bigger would have smashed his strongest apparatus by its sheer weight.

Only once did the Captain show a spirt of obstructiveness. Big Tom remembered the nut of metal with which the Captain had intended crushing Swain's skull when Lila changed his mind for him, and he recalled that it had sunk deep into the trunk of a tree. Meanwhile Colton and Little Tom reported that it would be impossible to drag out from the cave a similar lump of the mysterious metal, for a very good reason: the Captain was always on hand to search them when they emerged from the siphon. He no longer stripped them or tore up their clothes to satisfy himself that they had concealed no lump of the forbidden metal. They saved him the trouble by undressing before him and letting him shake their garments after they had turned them inside out for his inspection.

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It was impossible to give him the slip. The gurgling sigh of the expiring spring was an unfailing signal to his wariness. Wherever he happened to be when the whistle blew he dropped everything and hastened to his self-appointed job. So strategy or, what is ultimately the same thing, dirty dealing, was out of the question. There remained then only one possibility of examining the strange metal of the cave. They must cut down the tree and extract the lump which Swain and his five blacks had dragged out with much sweating and perverse perseverance.

The theory was a hit, the practice missed fire. They cut down the tree easily enough, much to the Captain's delight. He even helped by pushing it over when it was but two-thirds cut through. They then proceeded to hack out the section containing Swain's nut of metal. The Captain stood by, watching the proceedings with great interest. At last the short log containing the nut rolled free. The Captain sprang into action.

Gently now—for him—kicking aside the laborers, he began trundling away the log with all the strength of his massive legs. Getting it to the ravine, he rolled it over the edge. As it struck the bottom the log burst in two, sheared through by the sudden momentum of the metal nut which it had taken six straining men to move, and the coveted nut ploughed its way diagonally down through the solid rock.

Thereafter the Captain forbade any loitering near the spot. Big Tom had not even seen the nut for which he longed. But he knew from the minute descriptions of the main mass in the caves, which Little Tom and Colton reported, that, whatever it might be, the strange metal certainly was not iron. He decided to investigate at first hand.

LEAVING their iron-nailed boots in the siphon, the three men lugged about a hundred pounds of Big Tom's scientific apparatus into the main cave. They did not make the mistake of taking in any instruments containing steel or iron in its construction. To have done so would have been equivalent to smashing it with a trip hammer. For they had now proved by an exhaustive series of experiments that iron and steel when brought into the vicinity of the main mass of metal multiplied in weight by at least a hundredfold. It was in a sense a new physical phenomenon. In another sense, as they concluded later, it was as old not only as the world but as the material universe. Ernst Mach had foreseen it, Albert Einstein had confirmed it by a wonderful chain of mathematical analysis.

In this sense it was old. But it was new in the sense that for the first time in the history of science it was being actually observed on an experimental scale, and on a scale that was all too big for convenience. But for the moment they had not grasped the unexpected fact of an "induced mass," and merely ordered their attack in accordance with the obstinate fact, deferring all attempts at an explanation until later. The only instruments they dared take into the cave were made exclusively of brass, quartz, glass and nickel.

Even a superficial examination of the mushroom-like mass of metal showed that it was not iron. The dense, granular structure, kidneylike in texture, showed it to be some different metal.

They were careful never to stay more than a few seconds at a time in its vicinity. The drunkenness, or feeling of false exhilaration which Little Tom and Colton had experienced after their first visit, was an indisputable effect of the metal. Knowing now what to fear the men steeled themselves against the evil attraction and put forth all their will power to avoid lingering too long under its besotting influence. But it required the best that was in them to resist "just one more before we go back," as Little Tom phrased it.

Their brass and crystal told them nothing. Then Little Tom had an idea. In his work he had specialized to a certain extent in spectrum analysis—the art of deciding what a substance is by means of the light emitted by its gas or white hot, glowing solid. He had a clear visual memory of the line structure of the spectra of all the metallic elements—the bright yellow of sodium, the crimson of strontium, and so on. If this black, shiny metal was indeed a new element, its spectrum would reveal the fact. They had with them only a small pocket spectroscope of brass and glass prisms. Removing the four or five steel screws which held the eyepiece to the tube, they inserted wooden plugs and prepared for the experiment.

If the spectrum was only slightly different from that of one of the known elements, or compound of elements, then

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the experiment would be a failure, for it is impossible to carry in the memory the exact appearance of about eighty different spectra given by the several known elements. But if the spectrum should prove to be as radically different from any already known as is that of sodium from strontium, then obviously the metal would be an easily detected new element, or a compound containing at least one new element.

To prepare for the crucial experiment they pressed the blacks into service. For five days they collected all the knots of resinous, pitchy wood within a mile's radius of their camp, and carried them into the cave between spoutings of the intermittent spring. At last the huge bonfire was lit directly over the central mass of metal. They plied it with fuel till the red coals roared and glowed, cooking the metal beneath. At length a spot of the black mass turned slowly a glowing cherry red, then an angry orange, and finally a bluish white.

"Here goes," said Big Tom. "As senior partner of the firm I take first look."

He peered through the small spectroscope at the glowing metal. Without a word he handed the instrument to Little Tom.

"Well?" they said simultaneously.

"I say it's new," Little Tom announced. "Unmistakably. There is nothing like it anywhere in the whole range of known elements."

"That is what I say too. Can you remember the lines?"

"Yes, but not in here. Come on. Let's get out before we go crazy."

Colton had preceded them to the exit. The strange influence of the metal affected him more strongly than it did either of the Blakes, and he resented it.

"That's the last time you ever get me into that rotten hole," he snapped as the two Toms joined him. "I've had enough."

"So have we. To go back again would be mere idle curiosity. We have found out all we can at this stage of the game."

"Is it a new element, as you suspected?"

"It is. There's nothing like it in the whole range of chemistry or physics," Little Tom declared emphatically. "The extraordinary complexity of its spectrum puts it in a class by itself."

"And here comes the Captain," Colton laughed, "to put us where we belong. Take off your shirts."

They passed the customs officer without unpleasantness. The Captain was feeling jovial. He had brought a huge, hard nut of some sort with him as a gift. Having smashed it on the rocks he insisted that the men share the juicy white meat.

"Tastes like fish," Big Tom remarked disgustedly. "I hope the beastly thing isn't poisonous."

"I admit it isn't appetizing," Colton agreed. "But I'll bet it is harmless and nourishing. The Captain is incapable of a dirty, civilized trick *à la* Borgia. Aren't you, old boy?" he concluded, giving the huge gray giant a thumping punch in the ribs.

That gift was the precursor of others—tons of them. Seeing what the men ate in the way of fruits, the Captain scoured the forest to keep their table supplied. The lazy blacks were relieved of their duties. They wallowed in bananas.

It was on a Sunday morning that the Captain decided it was time to break camp and forage afield in pastures new. His arm was doing famously and he felt fine. Kicking down the tents, playfully footballing the pots and pans, he signified that they had dallied long enough in that particular spot. He was boisterous, but careful. He smashed nothing. To clinch his argument he picked up Lila like a doll and carried her a hundred yards into the forest. The men were just about to rescue her—or attempt the impossible—when he set her down, feet up. They saw the point. He wished to show them the remaining places of interest in that enchanted forest. Packing up in a hurry they followed him into the green twilight.

CHAPTER VII

THE IRON FACE

FOR twenty days the gray giant led them through the forest. When they came to a stream they forded it, or felled a tree if the water was deep or swift, and passed over dry shod. Their guide knew the ways around the frequent swamps as if he were an expert topographer. Evidently every foot of that long journey was familiar to his feet, for he never faltered. How many times had he traveled it, and for what purpose? Had he guided Swain? They could only speculate. Without misgiving they followed where he led. His intentions were clearly friendly. He had tried the men and found them necessary for his enjoyment of life. Now, perhaps, he

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sought to detain them as long as his strange life lasted.

Only the blacks of the party murmured at the excessive marches. But they could not turn back, for there was nowhere to go. The forest through which they passed was totally uninhabited, except by prowling beasts. They were never attacked. The forest folk knew their master when they saw him.

At night the Captain invariably disappeared. They never learned where he slept, but guessed that it was not far from their own quarters. In the mornings he would reappear, usually with an offering of fruit. After he observed that they ate certain kinds of birds he began bringing in poultry. How he ever caught the birds remained a mystery. Probably he plucked them from their low perches in the trees at night, like a Negro robbing a henroost. His own food consisted exclusively of fruit and nuts. When they saw him eating they were curiously and painfully reminded of Swain. They wished he would dine in private. But he seemed to like their company at meals.

Although his arm was now practically healed and well past any danger of infection, he still insisted on having it dressed twice a day. It had become a sort of religious ritual with him. As their supply of antiseptics was not inexhaustible they satisfied him by bathing the arm in water slightly colored with coffee. This simple and inexpensive rite cemented the already close friendship between the Captain and the whites. He appeared to dislike the blacks.

At last, on the morning of the twenty-first day, they found the first signs of intelligent life. A deserted hovel of leaves and bark in a straggling forest, a few arrow heads and the remnants of what might have been a crude cane basket, marked the recent presence of human beings. Later the same day they discovered further evidence of human habitation, but saw neither man nor woman. The Captain seemed to resent the presence of the hovels. Whenever he spied one not well on its way to ruin he kicked it over.

The forest in this region was of a stunted growth with few trees and almost no scrub. The ground too was remarkably level, suspiciously so, in fact.

"This is more like a courtyard than a supposed wilderness," Big Tom remarked. "Where's the ruined temple with the golden idol of the ruby eyes and emerald teeth?" he asked laughingly.

"They always do find those things in African forests," Lila sighed. "At least in novels."

"This doesn't happen to be a novel," Little Tom observed. "So you will have to go without your rubies. Try this nice scarlet pickle instead."

Lila fled with a real scream from the ugly red slug dangled before her eyes.

"Put that down," Big Tom said testily. "It may be poisonous. You'll get bitten or stung one of these days." The rich fauna of the forest had irritated him from the first. No sooner had he recovered from the fear of death by sleeping sickness than he fell a martyr to the imaginary fangs of incredibly venomous reptiles in his blankets. Even the common flea, a donation from the hairy Captain apparently, for the blacks proved not guilty, slew him in agony at least twice every night.

This phenomenon, by the way, greatly interested Colton. The Captain, he declared, was human even to his parasites. The only thing in which he fell short of the complete and perfect man was the godlike gift of eloquence. But he made up for the deficiency in other ways. He had an arm with a punch in it, an expressive kick, a dumb fidelity, and he understood practical politics better than any Irishman ever born. Witness his handling of the debate in the ravine.

Outcroppings of dressed stone, the pavement of some long forgotten courtyard, began to appear. The floor sloped gently up, and the men were reminded of the mushroomlike growth of strange metal in the cave.

"We are coming to another of those meteors," Little Tom hazarded, "drawn by the cave artist. This must be the one that fell in a forest."

But he was wrong. They were not to discover that fragment from the heavens which the primitive artist had represented as falling in a forest. It was Colton who first threw doubt on Little Tom's guess.

"If the big mushroom in the cave was one of those meteors," he said, "we can't be coming near another of the same batch now. Otherwise we should all feel drunk and beastly. There is no appreciable mass of that infernal metal within miles."

And so it proved. The Captain led them out of the sparse scrub toward a low mound about a hundred feet in circum-

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ference, of reddish rock. Walking directly up it to the crest, he motioned for the others to follow, and halted. Was this the end of his pilgrimage? And if so, what was his object in bringing them a three weeks' arduous tramp through the forest to see this supposed wonder of the world?

At first they perceived nothing more unusual than a large bump of dense red rock, probably a rich iron ore. But as they stared the ridges and furrows took on a design. From their position it was difficult to appreciate the whole of that curious work of art. The Captain offered no help. He had a generous faith in the intelligence of these whites to whom pain was an obedient slave. Gradually they deciphered the meaning of those bold g r o o v e s and hollows scarring the mounded rock. The whole mass had been carved to the semblance of a face staring at the sky.

THEY moved from place to place, the better to obtain a connected view. There was a rude, brutal strength about the execution of that massive sculpture which repelled the beholders. The face might have been human. If so it belonged to a primitive or degenerate race.

"Is it a man's face?" Lila asked.

"I think not," Colton replied. "To me it looks like a halfway cross between a baboon and a dog. Still, there is something human about it all."

"Too bad the Captain can't talk, and explain his picture gallery," Big Tom remarked.

The Captain, seeing that they observed what was expected of them, did the next best thing to talking. He stamped on the image twice, then pointed to his own face. Colton looked from one to the other, the stony, brutal face and the Captain's, barely human. He shook his head, puzzled.

"You're wrong, old boy," he said. "This isn't your picture. Just see how the rains and wind have weathered it down. There's not a trace of the chisel, nor of any other cutting instrument. And the surface is all pocked like a lump of flint that has kicked about the river beds for ages. No, this must be at least as old as the last ice age."

"I don't think he means us to understand it as his portrait," Lila objected. She had been watching the Captain closely. "There is a resemblance, you must admit. He and the image have the same expression of 'lostness,' if you know what I mean. They both look as if they had once been human."

"But the Captain *is* human," the doctor objected. "He is no more of an ape than I am."

"Still, that idea of 'lostness' is what the stone face expresses," Lila persisted.

"Fallen angel?" Little Tom scoffed. "If so I'll take a jumping devil."

"You'll take pills if you get too smart," Colton snapped. He had been thinking hard. All during the long tramp through the forest he had turned over theories to account for the Captain. Not yet ready to acknowledge even to himself the startling conclusions he had reached, he resented the vaguest foreshadowing of his theory by another. The Captain was indeed "fallen," if the word meant anything at all. But that he had ever even remotely resembled an angel the doctor was far from ready to admit. Swain, he reflected, also had "fallen." The descent from manhood to brutehood is perhaps a greater fall than that from angel to man.

"So you think our friend the Captain," he said jestingly to Lila, "'on honey dew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise'?"

"I am sure," she retorted, "he hasn't lived on the milk of cocoanuts all his life."

"Perhaps he knew the taste of beer, or palm wine, in his youth?"

"Not unlikely."

"Miss Meredith, you are a most remarkable young woman. Your imagination does you credit."

"What about your own? Why don't you tell us what you think?"

"Professional reasons"—lamely.

"Nonsense! There isn't another doctor within a thousand miles to laugh at you. So you can make as many guesses as you like."

"Making mistaken guesses is a bad habit for a man of science. I shall wait until I have a chance to see inside the Captain's head."

"He will outlive you fifty years."

The doctor sighed. "Probably. Unless he gets appendicitis. Then I shall have to operate."

"You wouldn't dare!" she flashed. "It would be murder."

"You are right, also dreadfully in earnest. Hereafter I shall label my jokes."

"Would an X-ray of his head tell you anything?" Big Tom offered.

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"No. I must see the structure of certain parts of the brain, in particular the pituitary body. I wish I had used one of the conservatives back there in the ravine. But I didn't think of it until too late."

"One never does," Big Tom agreed mournfully. "Just two days ago I thought of a ridiculously simple experiment to try on those black-peppered rocks."

"Why not go back?" Little Tom suggested.

"We may yet, although it would do Colton no good. Not for the present, however. The Captain wants us to go on. Where he leads we follow, unless we prefer being chased. Hold on a minute, old top, I want a specimen of this rock."

While the others followed the impatient Captain, Big Tom snatched a rifle and hastily shot off a fragment of the red rock. It proved to be almost pure magnetite—black iron ore—rusted on the surface by the storms of unknown centuries.

That night was sleepless. From dark till dawn they huddled apprehensively about their fire, rifles cocked, listening to the soft padding of strangely human footfalls passing to and fro just beyond the limit of the firelight. When the tension was at its greatest they restrained themselves with difficulty from firing pointblank into the darkness. Only the feeling that attack would provoke counterattack held them level. If that same feeling were more prevalent, and nerves steadier, there would be less futile bloodshed. They longed for the Captain, but according to his custom he had disappeared at sundown.

With the bone-searching mists of dawn the sounds ceased. Stiff and miserable they made coffee and tried to cheer up. The uneasy fears of the night refused to be shaken off. They grew apprehensive about the Captain. Had he been waylaid and overcome?

"He wouldn't pass out quietly," Little Tom said hopefully. "If they jumped on him within a mile of here we should have heard the racket. Listen!"

They heard a cracking of small twigs and a steady swish of leaves as if some heavy body were being dragged over the ground. Slowly raising their rifles they waited. Through the mists a familiar figure stalked toward them. With a glad cry they dropped their rifles and ran to meet him. More than they guessed the huge, shaggy beast-man had become dear to them.

It was not an offering of fruit or fowls that he dragged over the leaves this cheerless m o r n i n g. Nonchalantly he pitched forward the night's catch, a dead black covered with patches of gray hair. There was no doubt about this one. It was a man. The degeneracy toward the apes had barely begun. Only the abnormal growth of hair and an evident thickening of the jawbone and skull distinguished this specimen from an ordinary African native. The body was powerfully built and of larger proportions than the average Negro. Possibly a rapid growth of the whole frame was the second stage of the disorder from which the victim suffered when the Captain, plucking him from his perch in the night, arrested forever the progress of his disease.

With a gesture to the trees the Captain intimated that the foliage hid others. This was his substitute for speech. The dead example of the dangers about them was a more lively warning than ten minutes of excited shouting. They admitted that their guide had found an eloquent substitute for speech. Knowing his background it was impossible to be shocked at his choice of words. They breakfasted and went on. Colton looked at the specimen longingly; but the Captain signified somewhat vigorously that it was time to leave.

THE Captain was in a hurry. Warily avoiding the denser clumps of brush and picking his way when possible well to one side of the larger trees, he passed on at a killing pace through the forest. The blacks began to murmur, and not without cause, for their heavy loads, carried on the head or slung over poles, caught in the overhanging branches or scrub and doubled their labor. They began to lag. The Captain, a born leader of men, got behind them and herded them with his feet.

"I don't like this," Big Tom muttered. "The Captain evidently knows more about this rotten forest than he cares to tell us."

The trail was easily followed. Numerous feet, far too many of them, kept this primitive highway through the forests and the jungles well worn. It was the long sure trail to an unholy shrine, older than Mecca, older than the white race. Pilgrims from the surrounding forests for a thousand miles were drawn slowly toward it by secret rumors on the out-

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skirts, to hasten their progress as they approached the region of certain reports, and run together from the four quarters of the compass like drops of water running down the inside of a bowl.

A generation would pass in the distant glades without a single human being setting out on the long journey. Then, the tradition of a great blessing that transformed human beings into a higher race, far in the dim recesses of the unknown forest, would slowly gather authority in some mysterious way, and a handful of the more adventurous young men of a credulous tribe would set out to follow the rumor. Perhaps one would win through to the goal; more often none. But always, in the course of a century, there was a net gain in the steady advance of a few from resting place to resting place, and the hopeful multitude about the shrine increased.

The hollow booming of the drums taken from post to farther outlying post, confirmed the rumor. Here, in this mystic region of the everlasting twilight, dwelt the god. Here there were strength and healing for whoever persevered through the perils of the march. Here the victors over poisonous vipers and deadlier fevers might drink deep of the new life which would make them stronger than the unconquerable beasts.

The sophisticated whites, wise in their generation, were now swiftly approaching a more efficacious shrine of "healing" than any in France or Italy. The miracles performed at this oldest holy spot on earth were indeed genuine and of an order to impress the most hardened skeptic. Colton, as a medical man, might have underrated the undoubted cures at the European shrines; it was but the logical outcome of his drastic scientific purging that he should question, not the good faith of the cured, but their good sense.

The other men were neutral. Mind might be able to overcome matter; they did not know and were not particularly interested. The whole question savored of the Eighteenth Century with its absurd trials for witchcraft. To them the world had long since left all that sort of thing far behind. The properties of matter engrossed their attention. To understand why iron was iron seemed to them a sufficent object of Twentieth Century rational curiosity. So, although the Captain's peculiar personality baffled them, they did not expect a solution to the riddle from supernatural sources. Nature, they believed, is all sufficient. To get to the bottom of the mystery they had but to bide their time and keep their eyes open.

The Captain was doing his best to strengthen this wise resolution. By frequent gesticulations he kept their attention on the lower branches of the trees. They saw nothing to cause them alarm. The first intimation of danger was a small wooden shaft that buried itself in the bundle of bedding which one of the porters carried on his head. Bringing up the rear the Captain saw the shot. He also saw whence it had been loosed. Peering up in the tree he spied a venomous little face—human—looking down into his own with an expression of the most devilish hatred. The others saw it too. The next thing they saw was the Captain's leap. Quick as a cat he had picked the unhappy little devil off its perch. With one swing of his arm he sent it flying high over the treetops.

That was the end of that one. But there were more. The trees were full of the murderous little pygmies. These were the pilgrims to the mystic shrine, the seekers after godlike stature which would make them masters of the hated and envied gorillas. Flinging down their bales and baggage the porters cowered for shelter from the storm of vicious arrows that broke from all directions like a driving rain. The whites, shooting at random, sought cover behind trees, dodging from trunk to trunk as the storm veered. They hit nothing but the trees. Yet their salvos saved the day. It was the first time those bloodthirsty little devils had heard firearms. The bows dropped from their paralyzed hands and by dozens they tumbled after their weapons.

Although it was a matter of life and death the whites were for giving quarter and letting the mean little wretches escape. Not so the Captain. To him this was a holy war. Although the men were not to understand the reason for his cold, machine-like fury until months later, they sensed that this indeed was the Captain's private feud and that they had better stay out of it.

Never had he been so ruthlessly efficient. Seizing the pygmies by the neck, or leg or arm or whatever came handiest, he treated them as he had treated the first, hurling them high over the treetops. He had not time to break their backs with his one hand. Where ones

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or twos still clung paralyzed with fear to the limbs of the trees he brought them down with a well-aimed missile, which was one of their own kind. After the first futile attempts to halt his fury the whites fled, following the blacks into the forest where they could neither see nor hear. Had they but known it the Captain was performing an act of mercy. But mercy in action frequently is no pleasanter to witness than is a surgical operation. The Captain was indeed, as they learned later, the savior of his people. He was in fact a prohibition officer of a rare and incorruptible kind.

It was over. White and dazed they crept back, to find the Captain rounding up the blacks. He was still in a towering passion. From his expression it was all too evident that he was swearing in his own way. At last the safari was ready to proceed. Shaken by their terrible experience, and ashamed of their own impotence to prevent it, they trudged on.

That night the Captain did not follow his usual custom. He not only stayed with his friends, but shared their long watches, never sleeping. Through the endless night he ripped branches from the trees and piled them on the roaring fire that beat back the encircling mists. They had entered the danger zone.

NOON found them advancing rapidly over a rolling, rocky plain almost wholly destitute of trees. They had emerged from the forest with startling suddenness, to find themselves in a universe of violent colors and dazzling light that still half blinded their eyes. From the crest of a small hill they saw, miles away on the horizon, the long, gray unbroken barrier of the forest. This was merely a natural clearing which they were traversing. The sight of the blazing sun once more, and the all but intolerable brilliance of the landscape, was like a glimpse of heaven. Human beings without the sunlight are a miserable race.

Descending the little hill they marched after the Captain down a long furrow in the plain, blocked at its farther end by a crossridge of rock. The only vegetation within sight was a sort of stunted thornbush and the brown, ragged grass of last spring's rich carpet. Bare rocks showed where the temporary freshets of winter had coursed, but there was no spring or waterhole or any vestige of water. It would be impossible to camp more than a day or two in such a place. Their water bags held only enough for a full day's march. By rationing the supply they might make it last three days. So they urged the blacks to hurry and did their best to keep up with the Captain.

Halfway to the rock barrier at the end of their furrow, the Captain halted and held up his arm. He had seen the enemy. Looming up like giants against the skyline four huge figures sprang into view on the ridge, stood dead still for a few seconds regarding the travelers, and then, stepping back, rapidly dwindled from sight. They had run down the farther slope to bring reinforcements.

The Captain knew enough about military tactics to climb out of the hollow. With all those loose stones lying about, the bottom of a ditch was no place to put up a fight. He was over the top in a jiffy. The whites followed, driving up the blacks.

When they reached the top they saw nothing. The four huge scouts had vanished in a farther hollow. Should they go on, or wait where they were to see what happened? The Captain settled their doubts by setting off along the ridge at a run. When the Captain ran those who followed could only hope to keep up with him by flying. They did their best, but it was pretty poor. Soon the Captain was a good mile ahead of them. Then to their consternation they saw him gradually shorten and finally disappear. They had lost him in the next hollow. There was no doubt what to do this time. Without his guidance they were lost. While the others stayed with the safari, Little Tom ran forward as fast as he could go to try and catch a glimpse of the Captain. Presently he too dwindled over the skyline and vanished.

"I vote we fortify the camp," Big Tom suggested, hastily setting to work. "We may be safe enough, but this is no place for a white man to fight human gorillas. I wish that fool kid would come back." He was referring to his son.

They piled their baggage into a round wall and feverishly reinforced the outside with all the stones they could carry. Half an hour passed and still there was no sign of Little Tom or the Captain. Still they labored at the wall. An indefinable feeling warned them that they would need all the fortifications they could raise.

After the losses in the ravine there were only ten rifles left. Six of the porters were well trained and fairly good shots;

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the four whites were learning by experience how to make their ammunition count. If the other side had no firearms the party felt confident that it could stand a siege until thirst drove them out. Once on the plain, fighting in the open, it would be a gamble, depending for its outcome on the courage of their opponents.

With a scream Lila dropped the stone she was carrying. The men sprang for their rifles, to see Little Tom racing over the ridge. He stumbled, all but done in, got to his feet, and came on, reeling. He had run too far, and now was fighting for his life. Presently the huge bulk of the Captain hove into sight. They saw him bending down, straightening up, turning around, bending down, with mechanical regularity. He was fighting, literally singlehanded, a rearguard action.

The mob of pursuers leaped into view in a wide crescent with its horns rapidly closing in toward the two fugitives. Even at their distance the frantic defenders could hear the thunderous jarring of the charge as those hundreds of gigantic brutes raced after their quarry, hurling stones as they came.

As coolly as soldiers on parade the three whites opened fire into the advancing horde. In the vast sunlight of that glaring plain the cracking of their rifles sounded ridiculously thin and futile. Little Tom stumbled again, fell, and could not rise. He began crawling on all fours toward the camp. The blacks now had found the range, and the cracking of their rifles added to the din. The first of the pursuers pitched forward, hit in the stomach. Two more dropped. There was a momentary slackening of the charge as the huge brutes tried to understand why their fellows had fallen. Then it came on again, faster than ever.

THAT second's pause was the Captain's opportunity. He abandoned his rear guard action and ordered a retreat of all his forces.

"Save him!" Lila screamed, as if her voice could reach the racing giant, or as if he could have understood had he heard. But he needed no orders. Overtaking the crawling man he made a quick dive sideways, scooped him up, tucked him under his arm, and came on.

The horns of the crescent closed on him just as he leaped the wall and dropped Little Tom. The wall saved them, but not as they had planned. While they pumped steel slugs into the bellies of the yelling horde, the Captain bounded back over the wall, and with his feet and fist made an opening for himself in the disordered ranks pressing against the stones. Every hit, of fist or foot, was a kill. Having made his clearing, he lapsed once more into the living machine gun which had cleared the ravine.

With incredible speed the massive arm shot back and forth, hurling stones at the heads and shaggy faces of the enemy, never missing. Within ten minutes he had brained fifty of them. Then, seeing them waver, he leaped into their midst, seized one by the arm, tossed him high, and caught him by the ankle as he came down. He was armed. With this still living club he lashed about him, mowing down the enemy like ripe wheat.

As one club broke in his hand he tossed it up and seized another. Tiring at last of arm exercise, he hurled away the club, killing two in the act, and started kicking like a French boxer. His feet were even deadlier than his arm. Terror at last penetrated the thickened skulls, and the attackers broke, huddled together in their aimless flight like sheep before a coyote.

The whites yelled to him to desist, but he was not to be called off. Going into action again like a machine gun he pelted the rout with whatever came to his hand, stones or carcasses. Far over the ridge and beyond it he herded the shrieking rabble, till their clamor died on the rising breeze and became indistinct, like the memory of a nightmare.

"They attacked us," Colton croaked. His mouth was dry. "We are not to blame."

"Self-defense," Big Tom muttered. "Did you notice anything about those gray brutes, or was I dreaming?"

"Yes, I noticed it," Colton replied. "They yelled like savages."

"Still they looked like the others in the ravine."

"Not nearly so big. Not so muscular by half. And their heads were different. Not so much hair on their bodies."

"What do you make of it?" Little Tom asked.

"Don't ask me." He groaned. "I've had about enough for a while."

"Hadn't we better try to overtake him?" Lila suggested. "They may rally and overpower him."

"He can take care of himself," Big Tom asserted. "And of us, too. Lord! Did you

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ever see such a scrapper as that one?"

The doctor's nerves had recovered.

"We may as well go on, I suppose. I'm not going to spend the night here. Those little devils in the woods are better than this."

An hour and a half later they encountered the Captain coming to meet them from his Armageddon. He had been hit in several places, but not seriously. Colton contented himself with washing the red bruises and dusting them liberally with boric. The Captain seemed amply rewarded for all his exertions.

That night they camped on the highest ridge, about halfway across the plain. Lighting five huge fires of thornbrush they turned in for the night, taking the usual watches in rotation. The Captain again disappeared in the dark, leaving them to protect themselves. From this they inferred that they were in no immediate danger of attack.

Toward morning Little Tom, then on sentry duty, made out three fires far away on the edge of the forest. He kept his knowledge till breakfast time.

"If we have to go through a forest full of these hairy half beasts," Big Tom spluttered, "I'm going back."

"Through the pygmies' country?" Colton laughed. "We put quite a few out of business no doubt, but there must be more in the jungle. You will probably arrive in time for the funeral."

"My own, too," he admitted gloomily. "What fool ever said anything about 'the spell of the African forests'? If ever I get home I'm not going farther than the front door as long as I live."

"How is it, Lila," Colton asked suddenly, "that you never have hysterics?"

"I do, all the time," she confessed.

"Where?"

"Inside."

"It isn't safe. You should let them out once in a while, or you'll burst."

But the worst of one kind at least, was over. Their living enemies henceforth were to be well within the Captain's capacity to handle. Dead matter only stood in their path with any real threat. The ferocity of the last attack had left them stunned and resentful. Why were they the target of such unreasoning hatred? They had done nothing to draw down all this wrath on their heads. If only the Captain could talk they might learn the sinister politics behind the brutal practice. But, like some soldiers, they remained always in total ignorance of what went on in the star chambers of the devil. Like them they never knew why they were forced to fight until long after the peace conference, and then only dimly.

AFTER a short council of war they decided to proceed, hoping to overtake the Captain. He was leading them, they knew, toward the forest on the opposite side of the plain. They would show their intelligence by getting on their way unaided. He had failed to appear for breakfast, possibly because he lacked his usual offering of fruit or fowls.

About ten o'clock they came upon unmistakable traces of his activity. Either early that morning or late the preceding afternoon he had passed that way, making their path through the wilderness straight and easy. Not only half a dozen of the ferocious half-beasts that had attacked them lay shattered on the rocks, but at least a score of undersized pygmies. The presence of these last bodies was an inexplicable surprise. What were the little devils doing off here, so far from their happy forest hell? Colton had an inspiration.

"The rest of you go ahead," he ordered, "while I stay here. Steer for that bay in the forest ahead. I can't lose you if you keep straight in line with it. Erasmus will stay with me to carry my stuff."

Colton was in command. His word was law. Still they hesitated. Did he know what he was doing? Lila guessed.

"Can't I stay to help?" she begged.

Colton considered. "If you promise not to have hysterics," he conceded.

"Hadn't we better hang around?" Big Tom suggested. "We don't know where the Captain is this time."

"No. Go ahead. I'll overtake you inside of four hours. If you get there first, wait for us at the edge of the forest."

Orders were orders, and they marched off, leaving Colton to his work with Lila and Erasmus. The doctor felt that the key to one lock at least of the riddle lay in his hand. It would not take long to gather what he wished. Lila stood by, handing him the instruments. From his box of medical supplies he took out a flat-topped jar of grain alcohol to receive the few specimens which he hoped to collect and preserve. His theory was all but complete; he needed, however, the confirmation of experiments, to be performed when he once more reached civilization and laboratories.

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Under the leadership of Big Tom the safari rapidly dwindled in the distance and vanished from their sight. Two hours later Colton had finished.

"Come on," he said. "See if we can overtake them before they reach the forest. It's up to you, Erasmus. If you drop that box I'll break your lily white neck. See? Forward, march!"

They overtook the safari half a mile from the edge of the forest.

"What luck?" Big Tom asked, visibly showing his relief at their safe arrival.

"Fine," the doctor exclaimed. "Those fellows with the gray hair are just about halfway between the Captain or the others of the ravine, and ordinary blacks. The pygmies were barely started on the road to degeneracy—if you care to call it that. When I get back to chemicals and a lab again I shall be able to piece out the whole story. At least I hope so. Have you seen anything of our friend the Captain?"

"Not a hair. Of course you saw his blazed trail all the way along?"

"Yes, he must have spent a busy night mopping up his enemies. I would give five years of my life to know the grounds of the quarrel between him and the others."

"I wouldn't go that far," Little Tom demurred. "Life just now is as rich as condensed milk. Still, I wish Swain had lingered a little longer. If that fellow had lived we might have known something."

They hesitated about entering the forest, although the trail was broad and well-traveled. Tiny huts, the handiwork of the pygmies, kicked over like beehives, here and there in the trees, showed where the Captain had preceded them. After weighing all the possibilities they decided to reconnoiter before venturing into the forest with the whole safari.

This time Big Tom, Little Tom and two of the best shots from the blacks were ordered forward. They were to follow the trail for an hour, if everything seemed safe, and turn back. In the event of an attack the sound of their firearms would be sufficient notice for the reinforcements to hurry forward. Boldly stepping out, with their eyes well peeled, they entered the weird, straggling forest.

Signs of recent habitation were plentiful. On both sides of the trail the capsized beehives showed where the venomous little pygmies had but lately been evicted. The ashes of several fires were still warm. But everywhere there was evidence of confusion, flight, and swift destruction. Bodies were not numerous. Those farther into the forest had heard the cries of those on the border and fled before the attack. Swift messengers, no doubt, returning from the outposts of yesterday's battle had raced panting along the trail warning all of the wrath to come. Only the stupid or incurably skeptical tarried, to have their necks broken or their heads cracked by the avenger.

AT THE edge of a marshy drinking hole they found the Captain's visiting card in the shape of several huge footprints and a couple of sprawling bodies. The slain were of gigantic size, but flabby. The massed flesh had not yet hardened into firm muscles. Like their cousins of the ravine they were thickly pelted with patches of coarse gray, dog-like hair. Lumps like these could have caused the muscular Captain no difficulty. The men wondered why he had bothered to do them to death. But they had not yet mastered their guide's philosophy. This was no war of aggression or flamboyant reprisal. It was as legitimate a crusade as any that ever devastated one population to rescue another against its will. And the Captain was as sure of himself as was King Richard. Moreover he was twice as efficient and a far better general. He may not have been a genius, but at any rate he had sufficient brains to avoid being crowned by a red-hot washing pot, as was his great predecessor.

They were about to turn back to the safari when a distant cracking of branches brought them to a halt with raised rifles. The cracking ceased. There was a sharp squeal, a ripping of twigs and leaves, and a gray shape catapulted through the trees before them, to crash sprawling on the ground not five yards from where they stood.

"He's at it again," Little Tom remarked. "I must say he's a sanitary beggar. When he cleans, he cleans."

It was the Captain's last shot. The unfortunate gray straggler had foolishly sought to elude the Captain's unerring eye by crouching under a thicket. Too great a love of his household god had proved his undoing. Now he was just a mess. The men hurried from the spot.

Presently the Captain overtook them.

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Planting himself in their path he barred their further progress in no equivocal terms.

"Well, old boy," Big Tom remarked pleasantly, "are you going to send us sailing over the treetops like a flock of spread-eagle bats?"

The Captain's reply was a quick grab for the two blacks, who seemed anxious to get away. They tarried, one under the Captain's right foot, the other under his stump. He was careful not to hurt either. Then all of a sudden he made up his mind, or what served him equally well in place of a mind. With a parting kick he sped the blacks on their way. It was not one of his lethal kicks, but a gentle shove like a mule's. They fled howling, leaving their rifles behind them. In token of surrender Big Tom laid his rifle flat on the ground. Little Tom followed suit. To their surprise the gray giant picked up the discarded toys and restored them to their owners.

"So diplomatic relations are not broken off, old boy?" Big Tom laughed. "Is that it?"

The huge beast-man towered over them, struggling to make himself understood. One glance at his face would have convinced the most chronic doubter on earth that the giant was struggling with every nerve of his body to recall a lost gift. The straining muscles of his face all but brought back the frozen speech to his lips. Almost, but not quite. He failed. With something like a gesture of despair he hunched down on a rock and sat brooding, chin in hand, the silent image of frustrated endeavor.

"What he wants is obvious enough," Little Tom said confidently. "He stopped us from going back. That means he wants us to go farther into the forest."

"Maybe. But I don't think it's all as simple as that. My guess is that he's trying to tell us why he has wiped out the population before we go on to the next job, whatever that may be. He didn't bring us all this way just to see him having a Roman holiday. There is design behind everything he has done. I tell you, that fellow has the power of reason, whether he has a human brain or not. Let's give your theory a trial. It is the first step, anyway."

Big Tom started off down the trail into the forest.

"Is this what you want?" he asked, looking back.

The gray giant followed him with his eyes. He was still trying to remember a lost art. Presently he got to his feet. Stalking down the trail he overtook Big Tom, passed him, and glanced back to see if he was being followed. Big Tom shook his head, and sat down.

"You're all right in some ways, Captain, but your temper is not always what it should be. I'll wait here till the others join me. Little Tom, suppose you run back and tell the crowd."

"And leave you alone with him? Nothing doing! There's a quicker way."

He fired four shots in rapid succession. The Captain understood at once. Stalking over to a convenient tree he leaned against it and waited patiently with the two men till the safari arrived.

"Everything all right?" Colton panted as he ran up ahead of the others.

"Seems to be," Big Tom admitted. "Is there any way, doctor, of restoring the power of speech to a man who has lost it?"

"Has he been trying to speak?"

"Either that or he has a unique gift for making faces. What about it? Can you make him talk?"

"Sometimes it is done," Colton replied. "But I never heard of a case like this. It is only successful, so far as I know, when pressure is removed from certain parts of the brain. The Captain's trouble is different. Unless my guess is utterly wrong it was not pressure on the brain that destroyed his power of speech—if he ever had it."

"Then what did?"

"I don't know. Some day I hope to find out."

"You think as I do, then, that he once was a normal human being?"

"It is quite possible."

"YOU are as cautious as all good doctors," Big Tom laughed. "I'll go you one better. From watching his tricks I have come to the conclusion that his skin was not always black."

"You think he may have been a white man?"

"I'll bet on it. But how I'm ever going to collect my money on the bet beats me. If the Captain was not a white man he knew somebody who was. Lots of his little habits are ours. Did you ever see a black stand in an attitude like that?"

"He may have caught his tricks from Swain," the doctor laughed incredulously. "They seem to have been old friends."

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"You bet they were. Do you remember the Captain's first call on him there in the ravine? But you didn't see it; I forgot. Little Tom and I did. The Captain greeted him with all the enthusiasm of an ex-convict hailing the judge who gave him thirty years. I wish you could make him talk."

"There is not one chance in millions that I, or any other doctor, could restore his power of speech. It is gone forever. He is fundamentally different from human beings, although he is still human in many ways, and will be till he dies."

"Which will be many years yet, I hope," Little Tom remarked. "He's a good scout."

"I don't know if that's a kind wish," the doctor said slowly. "If he has any remnants of a memory he must be living in hell."

The rest of the party joined them.

"We're still alive," Little Tom called cheerfully, seeing Lila's white and anxious face. "We just were too lazy to walk all the way back. The old boy wants us to follow him into the forest. What about it?"

"I'm game," said Lila; "but it isn't up to me to give the orders."

"Wow!" said Little Tom. "Right in the jaw. All right, Miss Meredith, I shall wait till Doctor Colton tells us what's what."

"The Captain has issued orders for me," Colton laughed. "We follow him into the forest."

The remainder of that journey was short. Half an hour after starting the Captain brushed aside a thorn bush and strode into a small clearing. In the center stood a great mass of grayish metal, the size of a large automobile, and approximately rectangular at the top and base. It shone in the sunlight like a new kettle, for it had been kept bright since the last ice age by the hands of thousands of worshipers. This was the forest idol, the god of a degenerate sect.

There could be no doubt as to the Captain's feelings toward the god. He was an iconoclast of the most violent type. Stooping down he seized the largest stone he could grasp in his one hand, and strode with it toward the sinister mass of metal. Within ten feet of it he let drive with all his strength. The missile shattered itself to fragments, but the metal showed not a scar. The Captain might have had better success if he had aimed at one of the edges. However, he had had his say, and he had said it more eloquently than any ten thousand reformers who ever thundered against the idols of the heathen. He disliked the god.

"I see," said Colton. "You can't smash it yourself, so you want us to have a try. Big Tom, have you any suggestions?"

"A thousand tons of T.N.T. might put a dent in it. But I doubt it. That stuff is meteoric iron."

"The deuce it is! Erasmus, bring me Mr. Blake's small tin box—the yellow one."

"What do you see?" Big Tom asked.

"A scar on that edge. It looks as if someone had taken a shot at it with a high powered rifle."

The guess proved right. The splinter of meteoric iron which Swain had stolen from Big Tom's work room on the day he disappeared, fitted the scar exactly.

"We are getting hotter," Colton observed.

CHAPTER VIII

THE IDOL BREAKERS

"ALL right, old top," Big Tom reassured the Captain, "what you say goes. If you want this thing smashed to smithereens, Little Tom and I will do our best to please you. Doubtless you know more about it than we do. For myself I think it is rather a pity to destroy such a magnificent meteor. It's the biggest one I ever saw, or even read of."

The huge Captain had again registered his disapproval of the enormous mass of meteoric iron. There could be no mistaking his meaning. Furiously he hurled stone after stone at the unyielding surface, with an expression on his working face of the most diabolical hatred. His actions spoke louder than prophetic denunciations and bloodcurdling curses.

"That's all very well," Colton agreed, "and I'm with you. This metal seems to be at the root of the trouble in some way we don't understand. But how on earth are we to get rid of it?"

"Big Tom's junk," Little Tom announced oracularly. "You are not the only wise cuckoo round here who has been hatching theories. Big Tom and I have a mutual egg as big as a moa's. Now, if you will command Erasmus to unpack all of Big Tom's toys, we will get to work."

While Erasmus gingerly set out the shining apparatus, now somewhat the

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worse for tropical heat and constant moisture, Colton questioned the two Toms as to their plan. At first he listened attentively, following every detail of the simple project for destroying the meteor. But, as Big Tom began elaborating, he soon became restive and inattentive. Finally, muttering an excuse, he rose and hurried over to the great block of shining metal. It seemed to have a sinister attraction for him.

The Blakes and Lila watched him curiously. She too was beginning to feel strangely restless. The two men were as yet unaffected. Little Tom had never told all that happened in the cave, so the others knew nothing of Colton's sudden intoxication under the influence of the black metal.

"What's he up to?" Big Tom whispered. "You might think it was something good to eat the way he snuffs around it."

"I'll go and see." Little Tom rose and sauntered over to join the doctor.

"Finding anything new and interesting?"

Colton turned on him with a smile that was almost an idiotic snarl.

"Mind your own business," he snapped. "Go away and leave me alone."

"You needn't get nasty about it." Little Tom lowered his voice. "Remember what happened in the caves. Better come away and let Big Tom and me attend to this. It doesn't seem to affect us so much."

"Go to the devil!"

"All right. Just as you like."

Little Tom went over to the Captain, who had been an interested spectator of Colton's doings. Plucking the gray giant by the arm, Little Tom led him to the block of metal. Then, behind Colton's back, he indulged in an expressive pantomime. The Captain understood. He all but grinned. Taking a step forward he gently tucked the doctor under his arm and stalked off with him into the forest. Colton's kicks and yells availed him nothing. The Captain tramped steadily ahead. About a hundred yards away he put down his burden, took a seat on the one spot that seemed fairly free of ants, and held the doctor close to his shaggy side in a loving embrace.

Lila was outraged.

"I think you're horrid!" she flashed at Little Tom, and darted off to solace her chief.

"Let her go," Little Tom grinned. "She was beginning to get a jag on herself. Did you notice her eyes?"

"Couldn't help it. I'm beginning to feel queer myself."

"Can you stick it out?"

"Don't know. It makes me drunk."

"Same here. But we've got to keep our heads."

"All right," Big Tom muttered. "You go ahead and find the best place to begin on it. I'll keep steady if you give me a minute. Look at Lila!"

The enraged Lila was pummeling the stolid Captain's arms in a vain effort to make him release her chief. The Captain paid no attention. Suddenly he released his hold on the doctor, and with a quick grab caught his annoyer. The next instant both Colton and Lila were nestled to the giant's hairy side.

BY this time the baleful emanation from the metal was beginning to affect the phlegmatic porters. They followed Little Tom around the meteor, their tongues protruding and their eyes rolling. This was better than beer, better even than the frothy palm wine. Straightening up in his search, Little Tom waved to the Captain. The giant got the point. He came immediately, bringing with him his two prisoners under his right arm.

As they saw what was in store for them the blacks retreated. But they were now intoxicated. Things looked pretty serious. In their excited condition they cast prudence to the wind and leaped for the rifles. The Captain halted with an inquiring look. What was to be done? If Little Tom ordered an attack the porters would be killed at one kick apiece of the Captain's terrible legs. If he ordered a halt, the porters might open fire. Then the chances were that even if the Captain carried off a few harmless slugs in his enormous muscles, Lila or the doctor would be fatally injured. What was he to do? The blacks were in an ugly mood.

It was the Captain who solved the puzzle. Dropping Lila and Colton he made one of his quick, spiderlike leaps and landed squarely in the center of the blacks. In two seconds they were a sprawling knot of legs and arms, and the Captain was coolly collecting their rifles in his enormous hand, two under his thumb and each finger. Offering Little Tom this bristling nosegay, he glanced round to see what had become of his prisoners. Big Tom was wrestling with

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Colton, while Lila, like a vicious cat, clawed at Tom's hair. The Captain was equal to the emergency. Having culled Lila, he stretched up to his full height and gently deposited her on the limb of a tree. Being a good fourteen feet above a nice, hard, flat rock she was safely out of mischief for the moment. Letting Colton go, the Captain rounded up the blacks and herded them under the tree. His next engagement, while Big Tom snatched a rifle and mounted guard over the porters, was with Colton. The doctor appeared to be clean out of his head. His savage attack on Little Tom had all the insensate fury of one of the gray beast men of the ravine. This time the Captain had to use force. When at last Colton was jerked free of Little Tom he was in a daze. The Captain had tapped him gently under the chin.

"How are we to keep an eye on all these maniacs while we do our work?" Little Tom panted, rearranging his tattered shirt.

"Leave it to the Captain. Fetch a tent rope for the blacks."

They tied the porters into a string by knotting their arms behind their backs and linking each man to his two neighbors. Colton they trussed up hand and foot. Then they laid him on a bare rock to be in a strategic position for the ants. It was the Captain's job to stamp on any that got too inquisitive. Giving him the free end of the rope to hold, they went on with their work. Lila, raging and in tears, was safe enough so long as she sat fairly still. If she tumbled from her perch, just to show her spite, the Captain would probably catch her before she hit bedrock.

"I've found the root of all the trouble," Little Tom announced. "It's here, just at the base of the metal."

He pointed out the upper segment of a black, circular mass about a yard in diameter, showing on the south face of the meteor.

"There is evidently a considerable lump of that infernal black metal imbedded in the meteoric iron. This is only the top of the slug. The rest must slope downward and back into the main mass. See the granular structure of this black stuff?"

"Yes, it is exactly like that vile mushroom in the cave. This meteor must be enormous. What we see is only its tip sticking up out of the ground," Big Tom hazarded.

"How do you make that out?"

"With a chunk of the black metal that size in it, the whole thing must weigh millions of tons. If this were all there is to it, the whole meteor would have sunk out of sight, clear through the solid rock by its own sheer weight, thousands of years ago. No, there must be a tremendous mass of iron under this to buoy up all those millions of tons of the black element. It is just like an iceberg, or a mountain range. The rest of this meteor is probably hard rock mixed with iron. It displaces an enormous mass of rocks, denser in the main than itself. Consequently it floats, just as a high mountain floats in the crust of the earth or like an iceberg in the ocean."

They set to work, laying out the necessary apparatus for an attack on this strange enemy of mankind.

"What shall we do if our theory doesn't work?" Big Tom laughed.

"Get out of here before we all go crazy. How does it affect you?"

"I want to shout, and dance, and sing, and brag like a drunken fool. If I know anything about Zeus and the other rips of Olympus this must be how they felt all the time the Trojan war was going on—drunk, sadistic, swinish and bloodthirsty. The best description is that I feel exactly like a Greek god. The filthy stuff has its attractions, I admit. If I hadn't seen the Captain and the fight in the ravine I should have settled down here to end my days. Now I know what it feels like to be a drug fiend. I don't blame Swain a bit. In fact I think he did the only thing a man of his antecedents could do under the circumstances."

"It doesn't seem to affect the Captain."

"Why should it? He's soaked to the eyes. His system is full of the stuff. Whatever change it is that this emanation induces in the cells of the body has gone to its limit in his case. You can't make a whiskey soak drunk on a couple of quarts. The Captain is in a similar fix. To get a kick out of this he would have to swallow the whole of that big black pill. Have you got the generator ready?"

"In a moment. I can't make my fingers take hold of things. This is a beastly sensation. What you said about feeling like a Greek god hits it exactly. 'Men like gods'—bah! Why not 'men like dogs'? See if you can make this infernal connection. The binding screw keeps slipping back in my fingers. If it wasn't for

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the fun of blowing this thing to hell I'd sit here and soak till I rotted into a hairy ape or a riotous Greek god."

Big Tom bungled with the easy connection. To save his soul he could not make it. The childishly easy trick had become as impossible to his brain and fingers as is a knot to a baboon.

"See if you can do it."

LITTLE TOM gritted his teeth and, like a drunkard threading a needle, blundered through the ridiculously simple operation.

"It's a good thing the only metals in any of this junk are platinum, copper, tungsten and tin," Little Tom remarked. "A scrap of iron would have crabbed the whole show."

Big Tom groaned. "I forgot to take my watch out of my pocket. It's ruined."

"Serves you right, fathead. After carefully taking off your shoes on account of ten cents' worth of nails, you go and leave a fifty-dollar watch, full of steel cogs and screws, in your pants' pocket."

"Well, you ruined yours in the cave, didn't you?"

"That was the first time. Colton's petered out later, too. Now we shall have to depend on Lila's wrist watch."

They fussed about, taking four times as long as they would ordinarily to do the simplest tasks. The emanation from the shiny black metal before them not only clouded their minds but changed their time span and slowed down all their movements.

"This stuff is worse than hasheesh," Little Tom growled. "Is the electrical machine ready for business? All right then, connect up the coil with the rest of it and fix the tube so that the rays strike right in the center of the black. You do it; my fingers have struck."

Big Tom, with much puffing and muffled swearing, finally got everything ready for sending the necessary voltage through the circuit. The X-ray tube was adjusted so that its pencil would impinge directly on the densest spot of the black mass.

"We've got to run this rickety coffee mill by hand," he grumbled, indicating the electrical machine.

"Of course. It doesn't look much like a Tibetan prayer wheel, does it? You take first turn, since you found out how it works."

Laboriously as an organ grinder turning out yard after yard of the *Star Spangled Banner,* Big Tom began to turn out electricity. The target of the X-ray tube turned dull red, became shiny, and slowly crept to white heat.

"It's your turn," Big Tom announced. "Keep it shining like a beautiful star. My arm's paralyzed."

Little Tom took his turn to the tune of *It Ain't Goin' to Rain No More.* Determined to best his father's record he ground away for forty-five minutes.

"There," he panted, relinquishing the handle, "see if you can beat that run."

"I don't want to. You can have the record. I'm not jealous. Keep your eye on the black stuff and see if anything happens."

Night had overtaken them unawares. Only the dazzling glow of the metal in the X-ray tube, stabbing the darkness and lighting up their faces with a bluish pallor, broke the ebony wall of the night. From the Captain's tree came a steady chorus of snores. Colton and the porters had dropped off. An occasional bass rumble, like the beginning of a thunderstorm, betrayed the nodding Captain.

"Better wake up the Captain," Big Tom advised, "and tell him to pull Lila off her roost. She'll break her beautiful coco if she pitches head first on that rock."

The Captain started to attention with a guilty jerk of all his muscles. Lighting a match Little Tom looked for Lila. He saw only her eyes, like a big cat's, gleaming down on him. Lila had not dozed; she was too angry.

"Want to come down by the fire, pussy?" he mocked.

"Yes." She knew when humble pie was her proper portion. Later she would get even.

Little Tom struck another match and pointed to the indignant Lila. The Captain reached up, took hold of her as gingerly as if she were twenty dollars' worth of fresh eggs, and deposited her without a single breakage on the rock.

"Feeling less woozy?" Little Tom inquired sympathetically.

"No," she answered shortly. "What do you want me to do?"

"First you had better keep as far away from us as you think safe. As that black metal gets really hot it may send out a stronger emanation. I begin to feel a headier effect already. Then, if you feel like it, you might build a good fire to cheer us up."

"And make some coffee?"

"You're a saint!"

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"You are sure I'm not a cat?"

"Lila! you know—"

"Your turn now," Big Tom called. "I'll guard Lila with my unbroken arm. Whew! Why didn't we bring some oil for that machine?"

Big Tom, being relieved, devoted himself to Lila. Together they collected firewood and searched for the coffeepot. She proved herself as adaptable as ever. No sooner was she off with the old than she was ready to take on a new. Like an expert Japanese juggler she kept the three men in the air and smiling. Sometimes it was only a stage smile, as was Little Tom's sour grin just now. Nevertheless it was a smile. With a good fire going, and the coffeepot steaming, they began to feel better. Big Tom stole over to inspect the Captain. He found the gray giant standing up with his back against the tree, fast asleep. The cord which bound the blacks was tightly wound round his arm. Big Tom gave him a gentle dig in the ribs. The huge fellow was awake and on his guard instantly.

"Lie down and take it easy," Big Tom suggested, unwinding the rope from the giant's arm. He secured the rope around the tree. The Captain, with a wistful glance at the fire, sank down, rested his back against the tree, and dropped fast asleep. The last two days had been strenuous even for his tremendous energy. He had done the work of a regiment, and now he slept like an army.

"Your turn," Little Tom called, just as Lila began serving the coffee.

"Try the other arm while I drink this. I won't be ten minutes."

"I'll guarantee you won't. Doesn't this stuff from the metal begin to get you? My head is spinning like a top."

Big Tom hurried over, leaving his coffee untasted.

"All right, I'll take a spell. Hullo! The stuff is beginning to get red hot at last. Ten minutes now will decide whether our theory is brilliant or just beautiful bosh. Go and have some hot coffee to take the taste of this stuff out of your mouth."

"Do you begin to taste something too?"

"A little bit. What do you get?"

"A metallic taste, like what mercury vapor might be if you could swallow it."

"Mine is more like iron. So it isn't imagination then, if we both get it. I'll grind like a virtuoso and see if we can't liven up the tempo a bit. Four hours more of this is about all I can stand. Go and get your coffee."

ALL through the night they took the grueling task in relays, in a stubborn endeavor to bring the tiny spot of the black new element to a white heat. Their simple and ingenious theory predicted that such must be the effect of the X-rays impinging on the extraordinarily dense black metal, but so far theory had failed to materialize into fact. The white spot was but the first link in their predicted chain of destruction. But obviously without a first link there could be no chain.

They began to despair. Strong coffee kept them awake, but the incessant labor used up their energy faster than the mild stimulant could replenish it. And to add to their misery they began having a succession of terrible waking nightmares. The emanation from the new element was being loosed in prodigious quantities under the steady action of the X-rays, and the effect on the men increased a hundredfold.

Long afterward Big Tom and Little Tom compared their waking dreams. There was a curious similarity in these nightmares. The emanation evidently was a specific poison with a very definite action on human tissue, particularly on the cells composing the glands and the central nervous system. Both men had inordinate visions of killing. These always took the form of vast butcheries of millions of men helpless before their irresistible fury. In these disordered imaginings they never saw modern weapons —gas, bombs, shells, or firearms of any description. The most they visualized was a club of deadly effectiveness. Again, when they were not envisaging boundless plains of slaughter, both men pictured deserts or wilderness over which roamed vast numbers of nomadic apes or shaggy, primitive men.

In these visions the earth lived and spoke a familiar language. Every rock had its distinct personality, and every withered blade of grass its sibilant message of fear. The goings and comings of the multitudes were always without purpose, aimless wanderings of half brutes from nothing into nothing. The stars in the skies of their vision were clearer, bluer than men see them, and they moved across the heavens visibly.

Of all their strange sensations the most distressing was an objectless fear. This came and went like a black cloud. It fastened on nothing; they could not fix its origin; it simply descended on

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them and brooded like a huge, evil bat over their oppressed minds. The like is known in certain diseases, and it is one of the worst persecutions a human being can suffer. The fear of their visions, however, was different from the other. While they dreaded its approach they looked for its coming with a feeling of intense spiritual hunger.

Fear was necessary to their existence. Without fear in their blood they could not breathe. They longed for the fear as a drunkard longs for his bottle or a derelict for his drug. This, they knew later, was the fatal attraction which drew the worshipers to their idol, and the poison which had made Swain the slave of his degrading passion.

Lila felt it and became restless. Muttering that she needed fresh air, she left the fire and wandered off into the forest. Too dazed to realize her danger the men let her go. Toward morning, while the spot on the black metal still glowed an angry red, the Captain awoke. The baleful influence had tinged his dreams, too. For the first time in years he sensed the once familiar call of his vice. The black devil which had brought him down to the beasts was breaking from its iron sleep, to rise refreshed and with the strength of ten thousand.

Towering over them the great gray beast-man filled his lungs with the tainted air, now distinctly metallic in its flavor. His nostrils distended, and the lips curled back from his teeth in a vicious snarl. Big Tom, resting at the time, saw their danger. If the Captain went berserk now he might smash them and their apparatus before they smashed the evil god. How was he to distract the giant's attention? What could he do to recall the fast vanishing intelligence? Like an inspiration from heaven he remembered the Captain's dazed wonder when he had seen Lila light a match. Big Tom opened his box, struck one, and held it up before the giant's eyes.

Again that hopeless battle dawned in the great creature's eyes. Memory struggled with oblivion, and was extinguished. The match went out. Big Tom lit another. This time the struggle to remember was fiercer. The man's sick soul all but thrust up an arm from the blackness which smothered it. What was he trying to remember? Or was he conscious of memory at all? Again the flood of darkness washed over him, drowning him in ages of forgetfulness.

Between him and the most ancient fire-builder yawned a chasm of millions of years. Yet a spark no bigger than an atom had glowed for an instant on the farther precipice, piercing his night. He had not remembered what he was. He only saw back to the three pyres in the ravine, and his purpose in leading these killers of pain to his accursed god. With a sudden gesture of despair he flung up his arm and reeled off, crashing through the thorn bushes and blundering like a drunkard into trees and rocks. He had remembered that the fear must be destroyed.

Dawn broke, cold and cheerless. A log smouldered in the gray ashes, making the lethal fog more hideous. Presently through the motionless miasma Lila reappeared. She crept to the dead ashes and huddled over the smoking log.

"Your turn," Little Tom said mechanically. They were now operating in five minute spells.

"All right," Big Tom assented. "I'll do a double shift while you build up the fire. Lila's back."

Little Tom rose to make way for his father. Then it happened.

"Look out!" he yelled.

A blinding flash of lightning burst from the black metal and struck the tree under which Colton, still bound hand and foot, lay beside the helpless porters.

AS IF it had been cleft by a gigantic axe the massive trunk of the tree was split in two. Already it was in flames as the halves slowly separated and came crashing to the earth. The blinding white fire volleyed in deafening bursts of sheer flame from the disintegrating rock, bewildering the frantic men who leaped to rescue their companions from the withering bolts. None so far had been struck; the crackling trunk took the full salvo of the whirling fire. At last Little Tom cut the cord binding the porters and cuffed them to safety. Looking round he saw Lila dragging the helpless Colton into the forest.

Through the bushes the huge Captain tore his way, regardless of the thorns lacerating his flesh at every step. Seeing the dazzling inferno he flung up his arm to shield his eyes and looked about for his friends. Big Tom lay stunned directly under the main shaft of flame issuing like water from a hydraulic gun under high pressure. The hard rod of fire might flash downward at any instant and in-

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cinerate his body in a flash. The Captain marked him. Big Tom had stumbled and fallen in a daze as he sprang for the tree to rescue Colton. The Captain was on him in two strides. Reaching his enormous arm under the withering bolt he dragged out his friend.

The whole mass of metal was now a dull red. Recovering his senses Big Tom fell upon the camp supplies and began dragging them to safety. The bedding was already beginning to smoke. The terrified blacks were useless. Moaning like cattle in a stable fire they stood and let Little Tom rain blows on their paralyzed bodies. They were unable to move; he could not round them up to salvage the supplies. But they were not needed; the Captain's feet did in ten seconds the work it would have taken their clumsy hands half an hour to perform. The outfit was saved. All of the scientific apparatus had been destroyed at the first blast.

Lila had now freed Colton. Making himself heard with difficulty above the roaring din he shouted to be told what had happened.

"God knows," Big Tom confessed. "We started more than we bargained for. Get out of here immediately! Don't you see the color of that metal?"

The whole block, not only the core of the black new element, was now a coruscating dazzle of purplish white flame, gleaming and scintillating like a million stars. Still the lightning flashed from the new element as it broke down into less dense metals, and still the intolerable heat increased.

With the Captain's aid they got the camp outfit into the forest and rounded up the blacks. In ten minutes they were fleeing before a fire which raced after them, licking up the trees like dry grass. The whole forest behind them burst into crackling flame; the wind rose; the crackling din became a steady roar as the winds from the plain rushed yelling into the furnace. Trees in their path wilted; their clothing scorched. At any instant the whole forest about them might burst into flame.

Picking up Lila who was about to collapse, the Captain darted up a well worn side trail through a sparser part of the forest. Trusting his judgment the others followed. With a dull explosion the forest they had just quitted became a seething inferno of red flames. Too late they realized their mistake. In their excitement they had followed the trail into the forest; they should have run for the open plain.

A sudden riot behind them told that they were on the right track. The Captain had taken the one chance to safety. Like a spotted streak a panther flashed past them; a rabble of horned monsters charged and knocked them aside; a vast multitude of flying creatures tore down the air before the racing flames, and an earth-shaking tread forewarned them of the oncoming charge of the elephants. Even the Captain stood aside as the bewildered beasts thundered by.

There came a lull in the living panic. Instantly they merged with the stream of forest goats and creeping things, and fought their way forward through the suffocating brown smoke. A shrill trumpeting and a prodigious splashing rose as the elephants plunged into the invisible swamp. All about them the rending of thorn brush and the ripping of scrub added to the din as the terrified beasts fought their way to safety. The Captain halted in his tracks, and as the others came up, sent them shooting down a steep declivity to the left. The last six feet of their descent was a sheer drop into shallow water.

When the last of the blacks had splashed with his load the Captain followed and leaped clear of the wallowing men beneath him. They could not see him through the acrid smoke, but heard him swashing out to the middle of the swampy lake. Luckily the decaying vegetation at the edge did not extend far. The bottom of the shallow pond was solid rock farther out, or they must have been mired and drowned.

Having rounded up the porters and helped them to recover their loads, the whites drove them after the Captain. Their guide had proved that he knew what he was about.

FOR four hours they stood in water up to their shoulders, deafened by the terror of plunging beasts forced out of their depth, and the incessant roar of the furnace all about them. The smoke all but strangled them, and they had to stand like piles and choke. Through the dim cloud an occasional sullen ember showed where a clump of resinous trees burned with a fiercer flame. All through that terrible morning the Captain stood like a rock, except when he coughed. He was their comfort.

About eleven o'clock, just when the fire

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was at its height, a blinding flash of lightning turned the brown pall to transparent red for an instant. It seemed directly overhead. The first terrific volley of thunder burst upon them, and for an hour they trembled in water that shook like a jelly beneath the incessant concussions. Then, without a warning drop, the full deluge of the heavens fell upon them. Before they had struggled to the shore the torrents from the sky had sensibly raised the water level. But they had also quenched the conflagration to a black, hissing wilderness of charred trunks.

The deluge smote them like a doubled fist. Helpless and without shelter they dragged themselves onto a steaming rock and waited for the downpour to cease. All through that unendurable storm the deafening volleys of the thunder never let up for two consecutive seconds.

At last the center of disturbance seemed to move slowly over them to the north. With one last smash of its clenched fist the rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Dazed and thankful they got to their feet. This time they would make no mistake. As fast as they could stagger they made their way through the hissing wilderness to the open plain. The Captain offered no objection. That way lay his pilgrimage of destruction.

Nearing the scene of their labors they stopped in astonishment. The entire block of metal had vanished. In its place was a gaping crater spouting white fire in a thin shaft from its center like a geyser. Cautiously they approached the edge and peered over. A broad cone gaped for a hundred yards sheer down. At its funnel end five flaming galleries branched off into the stone and metal core of the huge meteor. If Big Tom's theory was right that core must extend for miles under the plain and far behind them into the forest. The outcrop of metal had been destroyed; the destructive fire was boring its swift course through the metallic veins and roots of the stone berg.

"The experiment was a success," Little Tom remarked with a nervous chuckle.

"Too much of a success," Colton commented testily.

"Oh, I don't know. The Captain seems to enjoy the fireworks."

The huge avenger of his own wrong and of countless others was standing with his sound arm raised in a gesture of triumph. At last he had overcome the beast. As a final offering to the dying god he leaped back, seized a massive stone, and hurled it with all his strength down into the hissing white fire.

"Quite dramatic, old boy," Big Tom nodded with approval. "I know exactly how you feel. Last night I felt that way myself. It's just like signing the pledge, isn't it?"

"Signing now won't do him any good," Colton remarked. "He was ruined for life years ago. I wish I understood the workings of his brain."

"So does he, probably. I maintain he just acts—like all of us."

"Absurd!" Lila objected. "Everything he does is in line with some definitely thought-out plan."

"A three-day-old baby doesn't think," Colton replied. "Yet it knows where to find its dinner."

"The Captain is no baby. Look at his muscles."

"We are all babies in the way I mean —just more or less complicated machines that do certain things when we are wound up."

"Who winds us up?" She was going to drive him into a corner.

"I'll tell you some other time. Just now I'm going to dry out my clothes."

They sat about in the heat till the white fire steamed them dry.

"That's the first useful thing that blessed idol has done since it fell from the Pleiades," Big Tom declared with real gratitude. "I'm almost persuaded to become a worshiper of the new element."

"How did you start all this going?" Colton asked, while he rummaged about for something to eat.

"I'll tell you if the thunder will let me. What about it, old boy? What do you see over there?"

The Captain was standing with his back toward them, following with his eyes the black progress of the storm as it rolled and rumbled over the sky toward the north.

"Is it going home?" Little Tom asked curiously. "He seems to have something on his mind besides a mere love of nature at her damnedest. What is it, old fellow?"

They got up and joined him, trying to follow the direction of the thought which he was powerless to express. His whole face was a study in anxiety. The progress of the retreating storm held him with a strange fascination, as if his life depended on the direction it should take.

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For the first time they heard him make a vocal sound. Moaning softly to himself he shaded his eyes and stared to the east of north, as if looking there for the fulfillment of his hope. For the moment he had forgotten them. He was living a fragment of a vanished life that came and went before his eyes like the mirage of a dream.

"You said he could never speak," Lila whispered to Colton.

"That is not speech. Any animal could make those sounds. Still, it shows that the brain still has some sort of control of the vocal cords. He is laboring under some intense excitement. Probably the ordinary control of his central nervous system is in abeyance. For the moment he has lapsed into the shadow of something that he will never be again."

"A man?"

"He is a man. At least he is human."

"But he is not a man in the sense that you or the Blakes are men."

"Of course not. He is what the first man may have been like when he learned to walk erect. The Captain is a throwback to the most primitive type of men."

"What threw him back?" she questioned.

"I did not mean it in that sense exactly. It is too early for any such theory."

"Do you know what I think? He was once just an ordinary man like you. Then he fell."

"On what?"

"That's what I thought you were trying to find out."

"Perhaps I am. When I learn something definite I'll let you share it, however unorthodox it may be."

"Thanks," she said softly. "Ah! he looks happier."

The Captain had stopped moaning to himself. Like a general gazing down on his armies sweeping the field, he gazed out over the forest to the northeast where the flashing storm wheeled and rumbled on in a fiery whirlwind. The destroyer had taken the road he wished it to take. That it should do so was inevitable for purely physical reasons, but the Captain knew nothing of modern physics, or of ancient. His only knowledge was instinct and the shadowy vision of a forgotten existence.

"Shall we go on?" Big Tom suggested.

"I'm ready," Colton assented. "But which way? The Captain seems to have resigned his job as guide."

Big Tom went over to the Captain and punched him in the ribs.

"How about it, old boy? Do you want to go on, or are we going to camp here and watch this infernal fire?"

He pointed to the fire and then swept his arm round the horizon. The Captain took one farewell look at his rotting idol and started across the plain, heading northeast.

"So we follow the storm, do we?" Colton muttered. "I only hope it gets whereever it is going before we do."

AS THEY followed along the edge of the burned forest, always trending to the northeast, Colton quizzed the Blakes on their too successful experiment.

"We were not altogether wrong in our prediction," Big Tom maintained stoutly. "The scale was bigger than we anticipated. That's all." He glanced back over his shoulder at the white haze above the crater. "That flame is really a sort of lightning. It is more like an aurora borealis than anything else in nature—just a dense stream of electrons."

"And where do they come from?" Colton asked suspiciously. He suspected Big Tom of stringing him.

"Where shouldn't they come from? That meteor is veined and streaked with iron, to say nothing of the pockets here and there of the new element. We started the disintegration of the first pocket, and what we started is simply burning itself out on every scrap of metal in the meteor. It is like setting off a stock of dynamite. The explosion of the fulminate cap starts a train of explosions through the dynamite, and that's what does the damage. That black lump was the cap. We touched it off—a little too successfully, it seems. Now the whole of the metal is exploding."

"It all started in the cave," Little Tom answered, "that night you and I found the big mushroom. You remember how the nails dropped out of our shoes? Well, that gave me the first idea. Then you proved me wrong by showing with your compass that the nails hadn't been pulled out by a strong magnetic field. At the time I said nothing because one bad egg at a time is enough. But I had thought of the true explanation which Big Tom put into practice last night."

"You mean you did," his father corrected. "None of this modest violet stuff. We proved by its spectrum that the black

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metal was a new element. And we found tons of proof that it was at least several thousand times denser than any element known. The rest was easy.

"You know how sticks on water bob up and down in the waves from a stone thrown in, or from a passing boat. If you make the waves big enough, and frequent enough, the sticks get considerably excited, and may even jump half out of the water. Their vibrations are forced. We planned to speed up, to force, if you like, the natural rate of vibration of the atoms in that extraordinarily dense metal. We hoped even to be able to make the nuclei of those atoms dance like the devil by sending short enough waves into their happy gathering. Well, we did it. The X-ray waves were short enough to start the atoms of that dense element and their hard little cores jumping about to beat the band.

"Presently, like a boy working himself up in a swing, some of the nuclei got a real sweep to their oscillations, and burst clean out of their shells—the rings of electrons spinning about them like stars round a sun or bees round a hive. That started the fun. One excited nucleus knocked out another, the pair then knocked out two more; all four knocked out four more. At that rate it wasn't long before several billion billions of them were fighting like mad. Just about that time Little Tom let out his historic yell, and we all hunted the timber."

"We're going to hunt it again in a second," Colton remarked sourly. "Did you feel anything?"

The blacks did. Shaking with terror they threw down their loads, flung themselves kicking on the ground, and started bellowing like boobies. There was a sharp, short earthquake, and once more peace. The Captain jerked the porters to their feet, helped them with their loads, and gently sped them on their way with his caressing foot.

"That's nothing," Big Tom blustered, trying not to look scared.

"Then why are you so white around the eyes?" Colton retored.

"I was up all last night."

"You say that meteor has its roots all under this plain?" the doctor asked omnously.

"Probably. But don't let that worry you. It is at least half a mile deep."

"Did you ever walk across a battlefield that you knew was mined?"

"No, and I don't want to."

"According to your theory we are doing just that very thing now."

"I prefer to think," Big Tom answered judiciously, "of a volcano."

"Then stop thinking!" the doctor snapped. "You have thought altogether too much already."

"You're just plain jealous. Our experiment was a howling success. All the iron in the meteor is disintegrating beautifully into helium and possibly some other gases. What more could you want?" Big Tom asked.

"Nothing more. A little less gas would be more to the point."

"If you mean that personally," Big Tom began, but very tactfully Lila pacified him.

"The doctor was ill last night, and you worked too hard. Better not argue till you can keep your tempers."

Big Tom subsided, muttering. They had done a good job, any way, he growled. If those nuclei of the new element had not been so tremendously massive they never could have given them the proper swing to start the disintegration of the whole mass. They were just like so many hair triggers imbedded in a too delicate balance of negative electricity—swarms of electrons not steady enough to do their job of keeping the whole atom at all times in stable equilibrium.

It was something like radium, he declared. Only in radium the breaking down goes on spontaneously. They had been able to disintegrate the new element artificially because of its extraordinary density—thousands of times denser than the densest element known. Its atomic weight must be tens of thousands of times that of the next heaviest element at the end of the known scale.

"And what do you propose to name this breeder of insanity?" Colton asked, meaning by his uncomplimentary term the black metal whose emanations had turned his head.

"Asterium."

"Sounds like a new quack medicine. Why?"

"Because obviously, it came originally from a star. There is nothing whatsoever—"

Big Tom's lecture was rudely interrupted by the stupendous success of his own experiment. Like the explosion of a giant mine the ground beneath their feet heaved up its back. Then it burst not a hundred yards away.

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CHAPTER IX

THE SHINING CITY

"THERE'S your gas," the doctor snorted as he turned a somersault fully expecting the words to be his last.

"It's helium, anyway," Big Tom exploded as the breath was bumped out of him on landing. "Noninflammable. I told you so."

"Get us out of here, you idiot!" Colton snapped. He seemed to blame Big Tom for the whole rumpus.

"All right, go ahead. Don't fall into the crater. Look out—duck!"

What had gone up was following the law of universal gravitation and coming down. Great chunks of it skipped over the landscape like nimble sandhoppers. Being near the crater the party was comparatively safe. Only the smaller trash rained down in their vicinity, and only the Captain and two of the blacks were tickled up by the stinging pebbles.

They were too surfeited by their morning's experiences to be terrified at the gorgeous spectacle now being staged for their benefit. According to Big Tom's theory, the metal under them had disintegrated into vast quantities of helium gas as the pulse of disintegration raced through the metallic veins of the buried meteor and, finding no adequate outlet underground, was bursting a way through the rocky floor of the plain. At first there was just a hissing rush of the gas from the crater, like the escape of compressed air from a tank. Soon a faint light mingled with the gas, streaming upward in a fine spray. This, by Big Tom's theory, was an aurora from the shattered elements, a dense stream of free electrons.

As if to verify his theory the pure negative electricity, loosed in vast volumes on the moisture-laden air, began to raise the very devil. A lightning storm sprang into being before their very eyes. As the upward rushing ray broadened and took on the changing blues and greens of the metals which it volatilized in its escape from the meteor, a bounding cloud played upon its summit like a crystal ball in a fountain jet, and from this whirling vapor the evil lightnings darted their forked tongues like serpents. The storm was local, for the time being. But the huge, bellying black clouds that seemed to drop from all quarters of the heavens warned them the deluge was coming.

Still the stream of fierce light hissed upward with increasing speed as the clouds gathered, and the temperature rose to an oppressive pitch. In ten minutes it was as dark as if the sun had gone out. Only the faint, flickering glow from the geyser of electrons lit the mounded crater with a dead light. They were as safe where they stood as anywhere, yet the urge to break the intolerable spell and escape from that dying world was irresistible. Silent, and strangely small in the visible darkness, they followed the Captain away from the hissing fountain of light.

The landscape was the landscape of a dream. None of them remembered such a dream, yet each felt a curious sensation as if of trying to revision something which had been forgotten before birth. Its very strangeness was familiar. Yet they could not place the low hanging clouds, the illimitable plain and the shimmering darkness in any memory. It was a page out of the world's forgotten history.

If the Captain was impressed he gave no sign. Steadily forging ahead he bore always a little to the east of north, as if seeking a direct and well-known road to some desired goal. He had traveled that way before. Not all the thunderclouds that ever threatened an expectant earth could deter him now from following the road to his fate. Were not the breakers of idols with him? And should they be allowed to depart from this country without seeing the great stone, the origin of all evil, the iron star?

He knew the road well, for the idle curiosity of youth had led him along it not once, but many times. Not all of his degenerate sect knew where the star had fallen. The most were content with the fragment in the forest. But the great star, the devil which had fallen in the desert when men lived in caves and still held the less ferocious beasts in esteem as equals, was a shrine known only to the few. He was one of the few.

And now, if he thought at all, he hoped that the killers of pain and the blasters of idols would still have a bolt in their armory powerful enough to smite the fallen star and reduce its iron and black metal to less than air. That their apparatus had been destroyed in the very act of destruction would not have shaken his faith in their powers, even if he could have understood the loss and what it implied. He was in that happy state of

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believing the impossible of his beloved. These men were the tried workers of miracles, and his friends. Therefore he led them with simple faith to look upon the fallen Lucifer.

It was lucky for the Captain that nature took a hand, otherwise his faith might have gone the way of most baseless beliefs. The men had started the destruction. They were powerless to prevent nature from finishing it. It was like throwing a stone; once hurled, the stone must go its own way. The man who throws a stone cannot call it back. Their experiment had let loose a devil that must go its natural way and do its inevitable work independently of them or of any living thing. But the Captain could not know this. Consequently his friends got credit for more than they deserved. He had exalted them to the rôle of omnipotent destroyers.

In other words he confused the bomb with the idiot who sets a match to its fuse. It was a generous mistake, and a loyal one. Nevertheless it was a blunder. Only natural law saved the men's faces and made them, in the eyes of their worshiper, supernatural. They were not the first in history to profit by a like stupidity.

"Who said it wasn't going to rain any more?" Little Tom inquired in an aggrieved tone. "Here it comes again."

It came, filling the gullies and flattening the human mites crawling over the plain. The drumming thunder of the deluge, shooting straight down in the windless air for league after league over the plain, drowned the rumbling of the thunder overhead. At its worst they felt the ground jar under them, but heard no report. A flash on the low clouds far to the west marked another outburst of the exploding metal.

A second shock, more violent and more prolonged than the first, followed by a terrific concussion and a blinding glare, drew their startled eyes to the forest on the east. The stark brilliance of that unearthly light pierced even the iron curtains of the rain. They saw trees and rocks hurtling skyward like a shovelful of offal tossed into a garbage wagon. The sweepings fell, but so far away that the crash of falling rock and splintering timbers died before it reached them.

That was the beginning. One after another at first, like the opening guns of a desultory bombardment, craters burst in the forest and on the plain, and far

"Like a net of fireflies tangled in a silver braid."

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in the forest of the iron face beyond the plain. Then half a dozen exploded together. Thereafter the din became continuous. It seemed impossible that the heavens could have dammed back so much water since the world began. At each new volley from the exploding metals the downpour quickened. The human beings gave up trying to walk and huddled together, black and white, back to back with bowed heads. As volley after volley rocked the plain, and pillar after pillar of streaming light burst from the shattered rocks and reeling forests, they became insensible to sights or sound, and slept. It was the dead sleep of utter exhaustion. Even the Captain tented his arm over his head and let the rain stun him into insensibility.

WHEN they awoke the cold stars were shining over a dreary expanse of black water broken by frequent islands. They were on one of the islands, a ridge between two furrows of the plain. All about them they heard the dry rocks and parched soil sucking in the moisture, and over this steady, creeping noise, the lapping of the floods being sluiced off in the furrows. Dotted over the plain faint patches of white phosphorescence showed where the expiring craters still glowed.

They got to their feet and stamped to start the blood circulating, and miserably crawled along their ridge looking for a drier. Their drenched clothes clung to their bodies, impeding progress and making motion a misery. They stopped and sat down.

"Oh, for a fire," Lila sighed.

"Sorry you came?" The doctor laughed.

"No! That was a glorious storm."

"Carpet slippers, a bathrobe, and a pipe before a blazing log fire for mine," Big Tom muttered. "Lila, the next time you want to view a storm, please close the door behind you as you go out. I'm getting too old to enjoy a draught."

"I will," she laughed. "And I'll take an umbrella."

"Can't one of you brilliant physicists make a fire to dry our clothes?" Colton scoffed.

"A fire?" Little Tom retorted. "What do you want? Haven't you had fires enough for one day?"

"Not a bad idea," Big Tom took him up. "We can't sit still. See if we can make our way over to that electrical geyser to the right. It can't be more than half a mile away."

"I'll make it," Colton asserted through his clenched teeth, "if I have to swim. We can't get any wetter than we are."

"And I'll make you all some coffee when we get there," Lila promised. "That is, if the porters can lug my tin kitchen box there."

"They'll get it there," Colton growled. "Get up! You lazy beggars! What are you afraid of? This water isn't more than five feet deep if you keep in line with the next ridge. Into it! Put some speed into them, Erasmus."

Seeing what was forward, the Captain shouldered the sodden tents and the useless bedding and helped the reluctant blacks to make up their minds. An hour later they were gathered round the cheerful rim of the expiring electrical geyser.

For a distance of about ten feet from the lip the rocks were still a dull red. The stunning heat was better than a camp fire, better even than a whole burning forest. Their clothes were dry in no time, and the generous coffee cheered their vitals like a draught of new life.

For the first time in more than twenty-four hours they enjoyed a full meal. To celebrate the occasion they broached the emergency rations and had a real feed. Then, fed and comforted, they rolled over to sleep as they were. The last thing Colton heard was Little Tom's remark that the physicists had not fallen down on the job. They had been asked in midocean to build a fire, and behold, here was the fire.

By morning the plain was easily traversible. The water had disappeared except for the lowest furrows, where it still shone in long spears of light in the dazzling sun. Only to the far northeast was there any hint of yesterday's storm. In that region of the sky they saw a fury of forked lightnings darting incessantly in and out of the milky white horizon. Overhead the sky was as clear as glass, and bluer than the sea. The storm had passed on to its final assault.

The Captain refused breakfast for there was nothing in the rations that he regarded as food. The gods might eat strange yellow dust mixed with water and boiled, or salty carrion, but he was a clean eater. Contenting himself with a generous drink of water from a clean puddle, he stood by while they ate, watching the war in the far northeast. What subtle fascination did that distant play of the lightnings have for him? For al-

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most an hour he stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the distant war between earth and sky. The battlefield was so far away that no echo of the thunders reached them.

When they left the crater only the inner wall and a yard or two of the surrounding rock still glowed. The interior was a yellowish red, except at the root of the cone, where it still shone dazzling white. So far as they could judge the streaming jet of electrons from the disintegrating metal had subsided. The fire in that spot had burned itself out.

"All this meteor underneath us, I imagine," Big Tom remarked, "is pitted and pocketed with small deposits of asterium —our new element. It is the explosion of these pockets, breaking down into iron first, perhaps, and then from the sheer momentum of disintegration into helium and other gases, that made all those interesting little volcanoes yesterday."

"Little?" the doctor echoed. "What do you call a big one?"

"Well, one or two over there in the forest were a fair size," Big Tom admitted. "But you can't see much in the way of craters unless you go to the moon."

"Ever been there?" the doctor sniffed. "Your pocket theory is all right, except for one thing. How did all these pockets explode? They were not connected with the fuse which you and your promising young son lit yesterday morning like a pair of enthusiastic anarchists."

"Your question," Big Tom replied with mock pomposity, "is a good one. It does you credit. For the moment, however, I must decline to answer."

"Why? Don't you know?"

"How abrupt you are! Of course I know. I'll tell you when we get back to Chicago, in exchange for your theory of the Captain's decline and fall."

"I don't think he has fallen," Lila submitted quietly. "He's just as good a man as any of you."

"Better," Little Tom agreed heartily.

"Don't overdo it," she said severely.

"I mean it. Did you ever hear the Captain talking nonsense? Well, what man have you ever known with a record to beat that?"

"None, I suppose. They must all come to it sooner or later, unless they're born dumb."

"Precisely. The supply of bosh is infinite. Mankind is finite. There you have it, 'in tune with the infinite.' A sort of many-one correspondence between man and his oversoul. And I'll go you one better. I don't believe the Captain would talk nonsense even if he could. Remember that debate in the ravine. That was logic for you."

THE day was perhaps the happiest of all their long exploration. The sudden release from almost unendurable tension gave a new zest to life and a heightened brilliance to every changing aspect of the plain. Although the warring lightnings flashed all day over the far battlefield to the northeast, they were too distant to be distressing. Only the Captain watched them steadfastly; the others forgot them in the sheer joy of living. To him they were a beacon guiding him through the paler light of day to a well-remembered and hated shrine.

Night found them on the edge of the forest. They pitched camp on the plain, and sent the blacks after wood. By careful coaxing they started a small blaze. It was not long before the sodden logs were hissing and popping as cheerfully as the first fire of autumn. The Captain left them by the fire, and entered the forest, presumably to search for fruit.

Early the next morning he reappeared, bringing them a liberal supply of fruit and several fine plump birds of brilliant plumage. Having made an excellent breakfast they broke camp and followed their guide into the forest.

It was slow going while it lasted, but this was not the main forest, and by noon they had traversed the long, narrow peninsula of vegetation and were marching once more over open ground.

"Hold on," Colton ordered after they had gone half a mile. "This looks like the beginning of a long dry stretch. The rain has all sunk into this porous rock hours ago. Big Tom, will you take the porters back to the woods and get all our water carriers filled? That was a fairly clean pool we passed about a quarter of a mile from the edge."

With plenty of water for a long dry march they went on. Night overtook them in the middle of a somber wilderness of sand and lava.

"If the Captain hadn't shown us that he knows where he is going this far," Colton growled, "I should vote for turning back. How about it? Shall we retreat tomorrow, or advance?"

"Advance," they cried.

"All right. Don't blame me if you wish you hadn't."

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"Everything seems peaceful," Big Tom remarked. "That last storm on the horizon died down just before sunset. You don't see any signs of it anywhere now, do you?"

They peered over the desert to the northeast, but saw nothing. In the pitch darkness of the clear desert air they could have seen a candle at a distance of a mile.

"All serene," said Little Tom. "Let's go to sleep."

"We shan't need a guard tonight," Colton decided. "There are no animals within ten miles, I'll bet, and we have no fire to attract savages. Besides, our friend the Captain has elected to stay with us. I imagine he sleeps like a dog, with one eye half open."

They rolled into their blankets and in five minutes were sleeping like logs. It was still and black as Erebus as Colton started from his sleep. The Captain had gently kicked him. The doctor was on his feet instantly.

"What's up?" he asked involuntarily, forgetting that the Captain was incapable of replying.

"Beg pardon, old top," he muttered. "Just woke me for company? Is that it? Well, I'm game."

He turned round to find a convenient place to sit. Then he saw it. Miles away over the black desert a mounded constellation of twinkling lights flashed and scintillated like a city of ten million stars. The lights were festooned about the distant, invisible mountain in long avenues and gracefully curved lines following the contours, like the street lights of a great city. Or so it seemed to Colton's half wakened eyes, and the words came to his lips unbidden:

"The shining city!"

He quickly roused the others. Spellbound they stood gazing at the wonder and beauty of that distant city, alone in the desert, without a rival in the world. Its only peer might have been a star cluster seen from the Milky Way.

"'Like a net of fireflies tangled in a silver braid,'" Lila quoted softly. "What city can it be?"

"There is none in this part of Africa of such size," Colton replied. "We have discovered a new civilization."

"Some of those lights move," Big Tom announced presently. "See! They start at the top and creep down. Then they stop halfway."

The temptation to picture lighted vehicles descending the streets of the shining city was irresistible. But the longer they looked the less simple it became. The moving lights followed no regular paths down the mountain, but started at random and stopped anywhere.

"That is no ordinary city," Little Tom remarked. "Streets never ran like that. Are you sure it isn't an illusion?"

"And all of us having the same hallucination?" Colton scoffed.

"I don't mean that. It is real, except for the regularities. The whole mountain is a hive of lights, but they are not arranged according to any plan. The streets we think we see are accidental—tricks of the imagination."

He was interrupted by the Captain. Gently he shoved them forward, urging them to march on the city at once.

"You're the Captain," Colton laughed. "Orders are orders. Erasmus, get your boys going."

"Oh, hurry," Lila cried, "before it fades! It is the most beautiful dream I ever had."

"AS long as I live I shall remember this night," Lila murmured, when dawn broke and the Shining City melted into the sky. Faint and shadowy against the clear morning horizon loomed up the distant mountain, its many stars paling with the night's. As the sun rose over the desert its hard, brilliant light extinguished the distant sparks and the mountain became a broken cone of lapis, vast and solitary, in an infinite desert.

In spite of the Captain's impatience they made camp and slept for four hours before continuing to his objective, the distant peak in the wilderness. They rose refreshed and swallowed a ration and resumed their march over the sands and broken lava. By nightfall, when they pitched camp, the mountain was appreciably nearer. Tomorrow they would be within striking distance of its base.

With the departure of the sun the city again shone, and with a clearer, steadier brilliance. In the still air of the desert it seemed almost within an hour's walk. They imagined they could hear the faint rumbling of moving machinery as the occasional wandering lights traveled slowly down the slope, but this of course was an illusion.

"Aren't there more of those moving lights than last night?" Little Tom asked.

"I was thinking so when you spoke," Colton said. "And they look brighter."

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"That may be merely because there is less air between us and the city than yesterday. We covered a good many miles."

"Tomorrow we shall be at its gates," Lila sighed. "This is the city of my dreams—a place of light alone on a great desert, with only the stars and the winds to see its beauty. Why can't other cities be like this one?"

"Stockyards, for one thing," Big Tom suggested with barbarous brutality.

"You have no imagination," she retorted, taking his jest seriously.

"I'm glad you didn't say soul," he retorted. "I can't get along without that."

"The Captain has twice as much feeling as you have. I'm sure his sensibilities are keener." She sniffed. "He has stood there in exactly that pose ever since we got here."

"Why shouldn't he? Probably it is his old home town."

"I have been thinking the same all day," Colton said seriously. "And I don't believe he likes the thought of having to go back."

"Then why does he? There's lots of room here. Just look at all the places he might go to instead of returning to his native village. He's not bound to go anywhere against his will."

"How do you know? I'm beginning to believe he is. He is being drawn on in spite of himself."

"That's not the impression he gives me," said Lila. "Does he really want to go back? I don't think so."

"Then why is he going?" Little Tom asked.

"A sense of duty."

Big Tom roared. "I thought I cured you of the 'duty' idea before we reached the Matadai—five hundred years ago. Now you have gone and converted the guileless Captain to a mania for duty without his knowledge. Colton will have to analyze his mind for him and solve a few of his complexes. No, if our hairy friend is going back to the old town it is because he wants to go back, not because duty calls him. The Captain is a simple soul.

"Where the bee sucks there sucks he. You know what I mean—flowers and fruits and broken backs, and all that sort of thing are the sum total of his innocent existence. He is just like Adam before Eve offered him that bad apple."

"We shall never agree," she said a little stiffly. "So why argue?"

"Because, sweet, stiff-necked little missionary, I am jealous of your interest."

"How absurd you are."

"A woman's alibi. I'm twice as jealous as before."

"Please let me sleep. You are keeping everybody awake."

"Good night, and I hope you have a regular brute of a nightmare."

ALL the next day as they drew near the mysterious mountain, Lila and Big Tom continued their debate over the Captain's motives, and indeed it was a most interesting problem in semihuman psychology. Big Tom maintained that the Captain was just a beautiful machine with a delicately complex system of behavior, like a clock, or a radio set. Lila, on the other hand, while denying beauty to the Captain—not a very stout denial, however—insisted that he had a conscious soul.

Big Tom finally reduced her to enraged silence by declaring that his point of view and hers were identical. It was a mere matter of words, he asserted. She preferred the humanistic way of saying things, he the scientific. After that she refused to listen.

That night they camped outside the City gates, as Lila expressed it. Less than four miles away the vast bulk of the mountain rose abruptly from the gently sloping rock in a towering mass of black ablaze with incandescent patches of fire. All that afternoon they had ascended the gradual slope, following the lip of a deep fissure in the ancient rocks of the desert floor. As they advanced they saw other straight crevasses radiating in all directions from the base of the mountain. The impression that the whole tremendous mass of the mountain had slowly forced its way up through the desert floor, like a gigantic mushroom breaking the sod, became inescapable. They could almost follow in imagination the first emergence of the metal head through the cracking rocks, and the gradual age-long rise of the mountain as it heaved up the thick strata, rending them asunder as it rose. A god with a different time-span than theirs might have seen the whole drama in a day, like the rise of an iceberg after its plunge into the ocean from the parent glacier.

They had no means of judging how long that huge mushroom had been forcing its way up from the basalts of the earth's inner crust, but from the nature

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of the rocks which it shattered in its rise, they judged that it must have been slowly floating up since the last ice cap covered the tropics. Since then the ice had advanced and retreated many times from Europe. The men who had seen the fall of this tremendous meteor from the heavens must have been older than the most ancient cave dwellers of France and Italy. Probably the last of them perished ages before the first European scratched the outlines of a buffalo on the walls of their caves.

Around the fire, watching the massed furnaces of the "city," and listening to the distant thunder of the incandescent rocks rolling down the mountainside, the men recalled their experiences in the cave where they had first found the new element.

"I think the meaning of that old artist's masterpiece is plain enough," Little Tom began. "His tribe actually saw the bursting of what probably was the biggest meteor that ever exploded in the earth's atmosphere. There is the hole left by one as it struck the earth somewhere in Utah, a mile or so in diameter. But that one was a mere pill compared to this. I don't believe the artist actually saw the explosion in the sky himself. My theory is that he drew that picture from the traditions of his tribe. Some previous generation had seen the meteor burst and fall. Naturally the whole race would remember, and pass on the history to their children."

"What makes you think that?" Colton demanded critically.

"Well, we have seen the effect of the black metal—the new element—upon human beings, haven't we?"

"I haven't," the doctor objected obstinately.

"The rest of us have. Without indulging in any theories to account for all the beast men," Little Tom replied, "we can take our own experience. Why did we have to tie you up before we could do our job? You were feeling pretty gay, weren't you? There's no use denying it. And Lila had to be treed like a mad cat. Big Tom and I felt pretty woozy ourselves. And back there in the cave, where we first found asterium and proved it was a new element, we all went nutty. Do you concede the point?"

"No," the doctor growled. "But go on."

"I'll have to go back first. You remember how the artist represented the fall of five fragments of the meteor either on a plain or in forests. And you recall how the sixth and much the biggest splash of color on a white ground recorded the fall of the main mass, either on a desert or in a lake. It couldn't have fallen in a lake—unless this desert used to be under water—for that's the big chunk of the meteor we're looking at now. I'm sure we shall find conclusive evidence of this tomorrow.

"Now they didn't learn all this in a week, or in a year. It probably took them several generations to locate the *holes* where the meteor shower of their traditions struck the earth. Mind I say holes, and not the meteors themselves. This holds good for the six splashes depicted by the artist. He gave details only for the big and important fragments. Why he did this, I shall try to explain presently.

"But you remember, he had drawn a whole shower of golden sparks. All those sparks were meant to picture smaller fragments of the meteor which burst in the sky—before it struck the earth. From the number of those smaller golden sparks drawn by the artist, the meteor shower of his traditions must have been a deluge. The sky must have been fairly alive with balls and sparks of fire. Something like it occurred over England about eighteen-fifty—I forget the exact date."

"What became of all those millions of fragments? Some must have fallen in the forests where they were found soon afterwards by the tribe."

"Now picture to yourselves what would happen. Those primitive men, still new enough at the man business to be not quite sure of themselves, and still democratic enough to treat the apes and monkeys as cousins, if not as equals, these first men, I say, could not have been extraordinarily intelligent. So, seeing a lot of shining lumps of stone and metal falling out of the sky right into their own forests, they inferred that these marvelous celestial beings with the fiery hair had descended to dwell with them.

"Probably they were not yet sufficiently advanced to give all the separate chunks poetical names and call them gods. But the effect, I imagine, was about the same. Every lump of stone and metal which they found in their forests, half buried in the earth, was treated with respect and fear. In short it was worshiped.

"THESE were only the smaller chunks which became the tribal high gods. They had not yet found the impressive

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holes in the ground left by Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Apollo, and the rest in their sudden descent from an unimagined Olympus to the bowels of the earth. I doubt if even at that time there was a single beast man of all their tribes who could draw a straight line, much less a galloping animal. Those early finders of the smaller fragments were worshipers pure and simple. Their records were easily remembered stories passed down from father to son for generation after generation.

"Then came the distant descendants of these old-timers, who could draw pictures. They crystallized tradition and made it visible. Some of their work we saw on the walls of that cave. My theory is that the artist's masterpiece is much more than a record of traditions. It is both a history and a prophecy.

"Did you ever see a picture of the devil that gave you a real scare? No? Well, neither have I. The horns and harpoon tail are funny, but not effective. They are just the sort of thing a halfwitted idiot would imagine to frighten his disobedient, imbecile children. But that great artist of the cave really drew a picture of evil. His shapeless black cloud is infinitely more sinister in its lack of explicit horrors than are all the thickheaded devils of the Chinese middle ages. That old fellow drew a picture of evil that makes your flesh creep.

"What was he trying to tell his people? Why, it is obvious. In the hundreds of generations between the bursting of the meteor and the cave pictures, the wretched beast men had slowly grasped the hard fact that the heavens had handed them a bad egg. Their forest gods were a rotten lot. They noted, after hundreds of years of the bitter experience, that only those men and women of their tribes who abstained from worshiping the black, shapeless idols, remained men and women and had perfectly normal human children.

"The faithful worshipers, on the other hand, degenerated and became beasts. By this time those primitive men—such of them as were not hopelessly besotted by their evil habit—had begun to look down on the hairy apes and chattering monkeys as their distinct inferiors. The others saw no real difference. If anything, they rather preferred brutehood to intelligent manhood. Being victims of a degrading vice they elevated it to the sanctity of a cult. It was this that the artist recorded and, with the record, wrote a thundering declamation against the besotting delight of the degenerates.

"How did he get his message to his divided people? First he drew the shower of meteors. That was history. Then, by the bigger splashes, he recorded the traditional fall of six enormous chunks not yet discovered. I believe that by this time, however, the holes made by the fall of at least one or two of these main fragments had been found. They would be only deep, overgrown craters, but their significance perhaps would strike the wiser members of the tribe. Next, in his black cloud, the artist recorded the history of the evil, degenerating influence of the smaller fragments of the meteor, and warned his people to have nothing to do with the bigger chunks if ever any of them came—literally—to light.

"I would not go so far as to suggest that the artist foresaw the mushroom-like rise of the main fragments from the bowels of the earth where they had sunk. He knew nothing of modern theories of floating mountain ranges and waltzing continents. But he had a lively anticipation, I expect, of these once flaming devils of the air rising from their long sleep and walking abroad through the forests.

"That old artist was a true leader of his race. He showed his people the fork in the great highway of evolution. Those of his race who followed the beasts into the forest and hung around the degrading idols became beasts; those who kept away from the degenerating influence of the strange metal fallen from heaven became men, and continued along the main highway.

"He and his friends had long since decided that men are better than apes. So he left a warning to the enlightened to beware of Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Company, whenever those distinguished voluptuaries of despotism, war and wickedness should show their ugly heads above ground."

"IF I were a Buddhist," Lila said softly, when Little Tom finished his account of the forgotten painter of black evil, "I should say that the Captain is a reincarnation of that old artist."

"Oh, my astral body!" Big Tom laughed irreverently. "What next, sweet mystic?"

"I knew you would laugh," she sniffed contemptuously. "You scientists have no poetry in your souls."

"You mean little prig! As if Einstein's relativity weren't a grander epic than

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anything Milton ever wrote! You're hopeless. I'm glad I didn't propose to you on the boat."

"So am I. But," she added, with charming feminine illogic, "you did."

Little Tom rallied to his father's rescue. "This reincarnation theory of yours interests me, Lila. So you think the Captain has been guiding us through the forests and this desert to destroy the devils he drew a million years ago?"

"You know I meant nothing so absurd. But I do think he has consciously sought our help in destroying the evil that dragged him down."

"He's efficient, anyway," Big Tom remarked. "What do you say if we take him back to the States with us to enforce a few of our laws?"

"Don't be funny," she retorted. "You never will understand some things, in spite of all your physics."

"Granted," Big Tom sighed. "You, for instance. I doubt whether you are material at all. Just pure sentiment, aren't you?"

This was too much. She descended on him suddenly and gave his hair an excruciating dry massage.

"How's that for pure sentiment? Will you be good?"

"All right!" he howled. "I'm licked. Woman triumphs."

"There is one thing that still puzzles me," Colton remarked when order reigned once more. "What was it that dragged the nails out of our boots in the cave?"

"Induced mass," Big Tom replied promptly, if darkly.

"The deuce you say?"

"Not quite. Any excessively massive body makes every particle of matter in its neighborhood more massive. If you could suddenly pile up a million tons of iron in the neighborhood of a tack, the tack would weigh more than it did before. That's gospel; I'm not kidding you. It's a simple mathematical consequence of relativity."

"Well, I'll be damned," the doctor commented.

"Undoubtedly. There is one strange feature about what happened that I haven't figured out yet. The 'induced mass' seemed only to affect iron. Still we really know nothing yet about the details of this effect. When we get back to books and apparatus Little Tom and I must investigate, while you are writing up your memoir on Swain."

"Let Swain go for a moment. How do you account for this freak element 'asterium,' millions of times heavier than gold?"

"I don't," Big Tom confessed simply. "I leave that nut to the astronomers. One of them cracked it just before we left Chicago. He was at the British Association meeting in Toronto. Either he cracked the nut or his own nut is cracked; I'm not yet sure which. This famous and eminent gentleman proved that in a very hot star the outer rings of electrons get knocked off the atoms, the stripped atoms get squashed together at the center of the star under enormous pressure, and more massive 'elements' are formed there. The density of some of those gaseous stars he said—I didn't—is fifty thousand times that of water."

"Putting all things together, I guess that there may be dead stars of solid metals and rocks containing pockets of asterium—our new element—inconceivably denser than gold or platinum. The meteor that exploded over this desert was a wandering piece of such a star that got knocked to bits when it collided with another. Take it or leave it as you like; the theory isn't mine, so I don't care. In the meantime there stands a very practical fact. That mountain I am sure is one of the main pieces of the meteor come up to have a look at what it hit millions of years ago. Tomorrow we shall have a look at it. Hullo! The Captain seems to be having one of his periodical fits of prohibition."

The Captain had bent down and clutched a heavy stone. Then, straightening up to his full height, he hurled it with all his strength toward the blazing mountain.

"You want us to smash that too, old boy?" Colton asked, going up to him.

The great creature turned to him in the dark, pointed to the mountain and stamped his foot.

"I understand. You want us to put it back in the earth. Rather a tall order, I'm afraid. Your confidence flatters us."

"Tell him it is unnecessary," Big Tom laughed. "All the metal in it is disintegrating as fast as it can. Within a year or two it will be as dead and as harmless as a heap of ashes. That little storm we started touched it off."

"Not by lightning alone," Little Tom added. "The pulse of disintegration followed its natural route to the next source of attraction, just as a magnetic pole follows a line of force to the north. Na-

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ture did it; we didn't," he finished up.

"That's too deep for the Captain," Colton objected. "He wants this molehill flattened immediately."

"Then the poor chap is going to be disappointed. We've shown all our tricks."

"I'M going to be generous," Lila announced, "before we all go to sleep. A striking confirmation of Little Tom's theory has just occurred to me. Do you remember how the Captain stamped on that awful rusted iron face he showed us in the forest?"

"Of course," they chorused. Big Tom's "of course" had a jealous note, lifting it above the others.

"At the time I remarked how the Captain meant us to understand that it was like him, but in no sense a portrait. Do you know who carved that face in the iron?"

"No," Big Tom snorted. "And neither do you."

"Oh, yes I do. It was carved by the forest people after they realized how evil the fallen metal was for all their race. Wasn't it, Little Tom?"

Eager to show his intelligence by believing in hers, and delighted at the chance of flattering Lila into a belief in his good judgment, Little Tom heartily agreed.

"You've hit it," he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I don't believe it was done by the same tribe, or even the same race who painted the cave pictures. The carving of that face in what must have been solid iron at the time of the sculpture was a far harder job than painting flat pictures on the wall of a cave. It must have taken years of laborious scraping with flints or splinters of meteoric iron to wear down the grooves and shape the whole lump into a brutish human face. Still, they did it. I think that must have happened thousands and thousands of years after the painting of the cave pictures. The race who sculptured the iron was farther along the road to civilization than those first prophets of the cave. And my guess is that they had clean forgotten the warning of the cave picture, to rediscover it for themselves when they found their own people degenerating under the influence of a habit-forming vice."

"When the sculptors of iron first traversed the forest the race of cave artists had long since died or degenerated to the beasts. The iron gods had conquered them one way or the other. The new race, more civilized, soon found out what made their young men and women worthless drunkards and half beasts. Then they carved their warning in the iron and passed on, leaving the contaminating forest behind them forever. They left that half-human brutal face on the iron as a sign to warn off whoever should follow them through the forest. It is the symbol of devolution, the picture of the descent of man backward to the brutes."

"The pygmies," Colton remarked dryly, "don't seem to have paid much attention to the warning. All those little devils who stung us like a swarm of hornets were on their way to the great metallic drunk."

"Then you admit," Big Tom took him up eagerly, "that the gray beast men of the ravine were degenerated pygmies?"

"I admit nothing on such flimsy evidence. And as for the beast men of the ravine being degenerated, I don't see it. As human beings they were infinitely superior to those venomous little fiends in the trees. The mere lack of the power of speech is no sign of degeneracy. Quite the contrary, in fact. There are precious few orators who wouldn't be better off dumb."

"The doctor is on my side," Lila triumphed.

"I'm not!" he countered hotly. "Like any man of common sense I stand squarely in the middle. I refuse to take sides until all the evidence is sifted. And when it is all weighed and analyzed, I am just as likely to go straight up in the air as to join forces with either of you bands of overimaginative lunatics. You are altogether too romantic for a man of my plodding temperament."

"Just for that," Big Tom remarked vindictively, "I hope you hatch the craziest theory of the lot of us when you finally analyze those pickled glands and things you have in your bottle."

With that parting shot Big Tom rolled himself into his blanket and dropped off to sleep. Soon Colton and Little Tom followed, but Lila, entranced by the strange wonder of her dream city, rose and joined the Captain.

Hour after hour they stood together, a mite of a girl by the side of a huge half-beast, half-man, silently watching a scene unequalled for its sheer grandeur and mysterious beauty anywhere in the volcanoes of this world. In the absolute silence of the desert night they distinctly heard the steady, rushing hiss of the dis-

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integrating metals in the burning mountain, like the discharge from an electrical machine or the corona from a high voltage cable. Every now and then a distant thunder drowned the rustle of the fires, as an avalanche of rubble followed an incandescent rock, released at last by the withering heat, down the mountain side. There was no wind; yet the myriads of incandescent cliffs and candent promontories changed and glowed from instant to instant with a soft, variable whiteness, as if fanned by the breath of the invisible spirit of the night.

WHAT were the girl's thoughts as she watched through the night, till the advent of dawn dulled the fierce brilliance of a million white furnaces? She could not have told, except that in some mysterious way her thoughts were a part of the past, and a shadow of what once had been the mind of the silent giant by her side.

He never moved, and seemed neither to appreciate nor to resent her companionship through the long night. Like a man newly risen from the dead he stood there, staring at his grave, as it were, trying to remember what had extinguished his mind and who had buried his body. Speech was denied him through the long watches of the night, but with the coming of the dawn he moaned, as if he remembered.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Try to speak! You can if you will. Try, try, try!"

He turned and stared down on her head, golden in the rising sun. For perhaps the first time he was conscious of her presence. He looked at the stump of an arm which she had helped to heal, and then at her. He could remember that far back, but no farther, so far as his memory linked with the minds of human beings. Over his straining eyes the shadow of a hopeless conflict passed and left no trace beyond the momentary deepening of his distress.

"Try!" she cried.

Without a sound he turned his back on her and strode off to greet the risen sun. It was a primitive act, the natural religion of a man a little higher than the apes finding its natural expression in involuntary worship. Here was the flaming ball of the heavens at last dispelling the clinging cold of the cheerless night, and sending the warm blood coursing once more through sluggish veins and stiffened muscles.

It was the natural, unreasoning reverence of the grateful animal finding its inevitable expression. His long shadow fell upon her, brushed past her feet, and followed after the retreating giant. With the passing of his shadow she felt that she had failed no less than he, and that he had turned his back forever on the world of men.

She sighed, and set about the simple routine of providing a coffeeless breakfast in that wilderness where there was nothing but stones and sand to burn. To the jests of the men who rallied her on her early rising she replied with a laugh. Somehow she felt that they would not understand her vigil. She kept her secret and the Captain's. Not till long afterward did she confide her treasure to the one of them who was still sympathetic beneath his shell of acquired skepticism.

After breakfast the Captain returned.

"What next, old top?" Colton inquired. "You insist that we visit your home town? Very well, we're game. But I give you fair warning we haven't a single stick of dynamite with us. If you want it blown up you will have to wait till next time."

"Mind your step, old fellow," Big Tom cautioned, giving the gray giant a friendly dig in the ribs. "Don't lead us into any of those fiery furnaces. We're your men. Lead on, brave Captain!"

He led them rapidly over the steeply rising ground to the very base of the flaming mountain. Constant trickles of small, crushed rocks reminded them that the process of disintegration was still going on, undermining the cliffs and overhanging precipices as the metals rotted down to less than air. Galleries burrowed in all directions, following the exploded veins of metal to the core of the colossal meteor, and ancient fissures in its sides testified to the age-long stress and strain under which it had fought its slow way up to the light.

Along some of these galleries the rotting metals still fumed and shone evilly. Others were black, or faintly lit by a dying fire deep within the heart of stone. Recent vents and chaotic jumbles of shattered rock marked the sudden craters that had burst out only a few days previously when shallow pockets of the new element, their atoms vibrating to the transmitted pulse of destruction from the southeast, exploded in fiery clouds of white hot helium and tore asunder the solid rocks.

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"Do you suppose all the asterium in this huge chunk has exploded?" Big Tom asked his son.

"All that is not too deeply protected by a screening layer of dense rocks. But give them time enough, and the penetrating rays from this disintegration will touch off the rest."

"How much time?" Colton demanded in alarm.

"I haven't the slightest idea. It may take weeks, or months, or years, or seconds."

"Then we may be blown sky-high at any instant?"

"Possibly."

"Why didn't you warn us?"

"You never asked anything about it. Besides, Big Tom and I wanted to see the fun at close quarters."

"You idiots! Come on out of it!"

"Don't get excited. The main pocket of asterium is probably five or six hundred miles deep. It will take a long time for the disintegrating rays to pierce such a thickness as that. It's something like taking an X-ray picture of a fat man's bones through several feet of wood. You need a long exposure, don't you?"

He moved aside to let a white-hot boulder find its natural level. A small avalanche of red rubble followed.

"Come out of there!" Colton yelled to Big Tom. The inquisitive physicist had entered one of the cool galleries for purposes of exploration. At its end a faint light showed where a small pocket of asterium was still burning itself out.

"Nothing doing," Big Tom shouted from his tunnel. "This is a unique chance to observe at first hand one of the grandest sights in the universe. There's not the slightest danger. Come on, all of you, and see something that is worth all your trip."

Only Little Tom followed. Lila and Colton hung back with the porters, while the Captain looked on with evident approval. These idol breakers who had destroyed the devil of the forest were about to destroy the mountain, the colossal god known only to the unholy few, of whom he was one.

"Come back, you fools!" Colton shouted. "Come out of there or I'll shoot. Come—"

His voice was drowned in a dull rumble from above. Looking up in horror, he saw the whole mountainside in slow motion. The Captain saw it too. With one leap he was in the alley leading to the gallery. It was too late to enter the gallery and drag out the rash men hurrying to the entrance. Too late they knew that they were fools.

The Captain acted instinctively. Bracing himself in the alley he pressed against its walls with all his strength, making a cross of his body to break and hold up the fiery avalanche. Not sparing his left arm, although it must have been torture, he ground it into the wall to balance the pressure of his sound right arm.

The first flaming boulder of the avalanche struck him squarely on the shoulders. For a second he held it up, while the men scrambled to pass him.

"No more," he groaned, as the full avalanche buried him. He had died to save his friends.

Not the least of their grief was the full knowledge that their dead friend had spoken. Death had loosed his tongue.

CHAPTER X

THE SECRET OF THE METEOR

IN THE four months that had elapsed since their return to civilization the members of the party had slowly regained their strength. The nightmare of their last marches across the nameless desert to the trade routes was fast fading, and even their thirst seemed a thing of the past and unreal. Only two of the blacks had come through alive, but Lila and the three men, made of less coarse but more resistant stuff, survived unharmed. To have retraced their route by the way the Captain had led them would have been impossible. Without his protection they must have perished in the forests. They chose the less certain alternative, and set their faces to the East.

The desert traders who rescued them at the point of complete exhaustion saw them safely to a seaport hundreds of miles north of the Congo. Colton announced that he must return to Leopoldville to complete his work on the sleeping sickness. The others insisted upon accompanying him, and together they worked like horses to make the labor short. They had enough of Africa. In six weeks they were aboard the steamer, homeward bound. And now, at last, they were feeling human again. One and all they realized that "there is no place like home" is more than the outworn refrain of a too sentimental song. Only armchair

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critics who have enjoyed steam heat and electric fans all their lives scoff at that profound sentiment.

Colton had moved to a cheery apartment overlooking the Midway. The knife-edge blasts of November had long since stripped the trees naked, but he did not care. As he felt now he hated the sight of a green tree. Bare black branches and brick walls beyond a sheet of sooty ice were paradise enough for him after months of the tropical jungle with its rotting vegetation, its fevers, and its insatiable insects. A sine qua non of his house-hunting had been an open fireplace. Tonight, snugly sheltered from the zero blizzard, he sat before a roaring log fire awaiting his guests. It was a special occasion, of the greatest interest to each of the fellow travelers.

Lila was the first to arrive. Colton had hoped she would come before the others.

"I'm feeling old, Lila," he said as he helped her off with her wraps.

"Nonsense! You look ten years younger than when we left Matadai."

"A man of my age shouldn't crave open fireplaces and padded dressing gowns; I want to settle down and think. That's a bad sign."

"Adventure has lost some of its charm for me too," she admitted, sinking into a deep chair by the fireside. "Anything further would spoil the last. That was the one experience of one lifetime among millions. Not many human beings," she said seriously, "can hope to see what we saw."

"You mean the Captain?"

"Yes. He knew that he was to die if the others lived."

"And I think he was not sorry when he knew. Do you still believe he actually spoke at the last?"

"Sometimes I seem to remember the sounds distinctly as words. Then again it echoes like nothing more than a groan. I don't know."

"Nor do I. For the moment I thought he had spoken involuntarily. If so, he is happier dead. To remember, even dimly, in his condition, would be an intolerable torment. He could never have been remade into what he once was."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Since analyzing the chemicals in those glands you and I collected, I know that the beast men were hopelessly fallen from the human state. Swain's crazy theory seems to have a basis of truth. The emanations from the new element—asterium—broke down the slight but essential traces of mineral matter in the bodies of the human beings subjected to their influence, and the wretched addicts of a new drunkenness became perverted beyond recovery into something not human. The very structure of the tissues is changed. The cells are affected, as in certain diseases. Particularly the thyroid, the pituitary body and some of the less well known glands are changed beyond recognition. Their excretions, controlling bodily growth and profoundly regulating the higher faculties—speech, thought, behavior, and so on—have been replaced by other chemical compounds. The result is that the victims of this new, attractive vice developed in some respects far beyond normal human beings, and in others degenerated infinitely lower than the lowest savages."

"But couldn't you have cured him after you found out the cause of his disease?"

"That doesn't follow. It is easier to break down than to build up. The emanations from asterium break down the metallic elements into other, lighter elements. The whole chemistry of the body is changed, and it is changed downward, that is, toward greater simplicity. To cure a case of this perverted degeneracy I should have to build up what has been broken down. Any physicist will tell you that this is impossible in the present state of knowledge. The physicists have artificially broken down nearly a score of the elements; they have not yet succeeded in putting together a single one. So the Captain's case was quite hopeless. As I said, it is kinder to wish him as he is, rather than still wandering through the forests looking for his lost soul. I feel now that he had occasional flashes —I won't say of memory—of instinctive behavior impelling him to seek an existence which he had forgotten. He had been turned out of paradise, and he had forgotten the road back.

"Only an occasional flash of a leaf, perhaps, awoke him to a strange sense of familiarity which he could not fix. Our coming must have been like an elusive dream. He knew us, and yet we were strangers. Our everyday rifles—matches, clothes, firearms perhaps—were keys to a gate he had forgotten. If he had lived after we left him he would have been tormented for perhaps fifty futile years. He is better as he is."

"I suppose so," she sighed.

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The doorbell rang, and Colton rose.

"Before the Blakes come I want you to make me the happiest man on earth."

"Aren't you happy?" she asked, looking up at him with innocent eyes.

"Not without you. Will you?"

"Yes, if you really mean it, and are not asking me because I have no job."

"Lila! I swore to win you that night when the Captain first came to us."

"You won me," she confessed. "I shall never forget how kind you were to our poor friend."

"Then you will? Lila! Damn that bell! I'll have to go."

BIG TOM, hearing the happy news, looked as glum as an undertaker.

"I have nothing left to live for," he croaked. "I wish you joy."

"Have some firewater," Colton laughed, "and cheer up."

Little Tom, strange to say, appeared quite relieved. A new stenographer in his father's office had taught him the wisdom of taking a good long look before plunging. He was not yet ready for the stormy waters of matrimony.

"Did you get us out on a night like this just to see you two spooning before a draughty fireplace?" Big Tom complained as he poured out a second jolt.

"Would you like to hear the story of Swain's life?" Colton asked.

"Does it throw any light on asterium?" Big Tom demanded sourly. "Nobody believes me when I tell them about it."

"Not much. But it does clear up quite a bit of the mystery surrounding our friend the Captain."

"Ah, that's different! Anything about the Captain is good news. That chap was the whitest man I ever knew. But I give you fair warning," he added, "I won't believe a word Swain says about his character. So that's that."

"You have been putting a detective onto Swain's past?" Little Tom hazarded.

"It wasn't necessary. Swain's good opinion of himself has given us all the information we need." He took a fat letter from his pocket, and stood weighing it in his fingers. "I found this waiting for me at my bank the day after we got back to Chicago. It had been lying there ever since we left, with instructions to the bank to deliver it to me on my return from the Congo. I have kept it all these weeks without saying anything because I thought you would feel as I did when I first read it. To me the whole confession is inexpressibly painful, not for its revelation of Swain's character, but for its betrayal of his bigoted blindness.

"He never was able to see the Captain as a better man than himself. If Swain had not written this letter I should have kept a higher opinion of him. Probably you will feel the same. Still, we should not judge harshly. We four all loved the Captain so warmly that it is impossible for us to be fair. I put off sharing this with you until the Captain's death had been softened a little for us by time. You had better hear it, as in a way it is a fine testimonial to our instinctive feeling for a decent man, even when that man is as shaggy as a bear and as dumb as a stone."

He seated himself by the fire and began to read Swain's confession.

"'To Dr. J. B. Colton, Chicago.

"'Sir:

"'When you receive this I shall be far beyond reach of your irreverent scoffing. Although you examined me minutely as your patient you failed to discover my secret. I am the first American to live and preach the Higher Manhood. To your ignorant eyes, dulled by the scales of a futile science, I appeared only as a man. I am higher than man, for I am from the next stage of evolution beyond the human.

"'Yes, the next step in evolution. I employ, you notice, the essential word of your degrading doctrine. But my evolution is not that of the deluded scientists who falsely assert than men came from monkeys. Far from it. Mine is the new truth, which I have discovered. The truth that made me free.

"'Why should I trouble to convince you, a doubter and a hardened scoffer? I confess to a remnant of human frailty. It will give me a certain satisfaction to prove that you and all your bigoted fellow scientists are an ignorant, superstitious, truth-hating sect. You are the true children of the devil. To you is due all the misery and suffering of mankind. Your followers all are eternally lost. It is my sacred mission to lift the scales from your eyes and give you sight to see yourselves as you are.'"

"There is more of the same," Colton remarked dryly, skipping half a dozen pages. "That's enough to show you his general attitude. I'll pass to the alleged facts—as he recites them.

"'After graduating at the head of my

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class, I emigrated to the Congo as a medical missionary. It was my ambition to overthrow the false doctrine of evolution. Consequently I applied for a station where I could observe both the apes and men together.

"'In all of my earlier investigations my dear wife was a great help. She followed me into the forests without complaint, often living for months on the coarsest native food and such fruits as we could find. Her belief in me was justified. Before long I was to begin my great campaign against the children of the devil.

"'After the birth of our daughter, Edith, my wife for some time was unable to accompany me on my explorations. To secure allies I made friends with the men of several intelligent tribes. These acted as guides and helpers.

"'I had but little difficulty in convincing these clear thinkers, uncontaminated by the sewer of modern science, of the truth and justice of my mission. They became my eager allies in a war as holy as any that was ever waged in a righteous cause. My observations had taught me that the higher apes are practically identical with the lower races of men, except for one defect. The apes have no souls. This is my capital discovery. And what, you ask, is the evidence for this great truth? Let me put it as briefly as I can.

"'With false shame I can say that I am a born orator, and one of the most moving speakers of our generation. After I had mastered the native African languages I had no difficulty in leading those blind savages to the light. I opened their eyes. Yes, though I say it myself, it was my gift—for which I am humbly thankful—of silver eloquence that made the blind see. And what did they see when their eyes were opened by the gold of my compelling tongue? They saw that they were naked. And seeing that they were naked they covered their eyes and fled to the forest. They had found their souls. In simple and modest garments they clothed their indecency and returned to beseech further blessings.

"'The natives had heard the call to their souls. Did the apes respond? Did the chimpanzee walk modestly through the forest, clad in the badge of awakening? No! From limb to limb they swung in riotous nakedness. Though I persuaded as no man yet has persuaded, they turned deaf ears to my pleadings and continued before my very eyes their lawless way of life.

"'Is it not conclusive proof, even to one of your narrow, prejudiced kind, Dr. Colton?'

"I REALLY can't answer that," Colton commented. "You see I never had the privilege of hearing Swain lecture. The rest of this goes on with further arguments, all proving that apes have none of the higher faculties and no souls. We can take it as read. Swain next explains how he proposed to set things right. If he failed to make the monkeys wear pants he nevertheless converted them—otherwise.

"'I had shown beyond all cavilling that man and ape are one but for the divine spark, the soul, which illumines the body and mind of man. But the gross, natural eye of science would refuse to see the distinction. This I knew. And those disciples of the devil, the narrow, crass scientists, would continue to preach false doctrine, defiling the minds of the young. To destroy their polluted arguments once and for all I saw that I must annihilate —wipe out utterly—the lying evidence on which their soul-destroying theory is founded. As Cicero thundered in the Roman senate "Carthage must be destroyed!" so thundered I in the jungles of the Congo, "The Apes must be abolished!"

"'My humble friends, the black men of the rivers and the forests heard my thunder. By scores and by hundreds they rallied to my standard. I became a flaming torch at the head of a great and noble band of crusaders sworn to pluck out, root and branch, the chattering apes, the grimacing chimpanzees, the undisciplined orangoutangs and the strong, blasphemous gorillas. Do not misunderstand me. We marched forth with no banners fluttering on the breeze, nor with the blare of trumpets, nor to the soul-stirring call of bugles. Our war was secret, swift, and silent. Its battles were fought in the occult places of the forest. Our victories were bloodless, for I purified the children of the devil with fire.

"'Here a devoted band of followers, safe from the prying eyes of ignorant agents —all tools of the scientists, blind, miseducated men—here in the holy green twilight of the forest gathered a self-sacrificing band of truth lovers; far away, by the great river, gathered another, and still farther many more, all sworn to cleanse their land of the defilements of

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the devil. We became a secret order, as broad as the Congo, as deep, as swift and as relentless as its great rivers, sweeping into the black waters of death all who gainsaid us. Our drums spoke, and for hundreds of miles the faithful heard. A thousand sacred fires burst upon the night.'"

"We burst upon one and put it out," Big Tom remarked. "I don't like Swain any better than I did, even if he is decently buried."

"If you like," Colton replied, "I shall skip Swain's details of his holy war. It makes my blood run cold to think what one madman can accomplish with an ignorant mob. Some of this is worse than anything the Middle Ages has to show. And it is all done earnestly, piously, in the sacred name of truth."

"Skip it," they said.

"He goes on next to an account of his witch doctoring. Some unknown black man deserves our thanks. It appears that a rival witch doctor all but killed Swain for his attempted sacrifice—in the usual way—of an old ape beloved by the tribe. I noticed when I examined him that one of Swain's ribs had been broken at some time of his life. According to his account here, it was the rival witch doctor who got him alone in the forest and kicked in his slats. Swain appears to have been a man of almost zero physical courage. For the time being he called off his insane crusade against the apes. And during his layoff from hellishness he first met Campbell McKay."

"Our Captain?" Lila asked.

"Undoubtedly. From what Swain tells of McKay's life, and from information I have gathered here from the scientific societies, we can piece together the essential facts of McKay's career up to the time of his disappearance six years or more ago. As Swain's description of McKay's appearance when he first met him is interesting, I shall read it."

"'The blasphemous g e o l o g i s t,' says Swain, referring to McKay, 'stood six feet six, and was broad, muscular and profane in proportion. Like many of his race his besetting sin was the bottle. He was a cynical scoffer, with a contemptuous wit ready to his tongue and a sneering jest to his lips. When I first knew him he was not unhandsome, with a rude, rugged attractiveness. He had two boasts, his strength and his hard-headedness. I have seen him bend an inch steel bar in his hands, and I have known him to remain perfectly sober after drinking two quarts of whiskey during the course of a day.

"'It was his pride that no man in Africa could drink him down, and this bestial superiority was, I believe, a fact. I came to know him through my profession. He consulted me for what he called the "wee jumpies"—the obvious penalty of his excessive drinking. As he obstinately refused to admit that alcohol was at the root of his just punishment I could do nothing for him. Our conferences invariably ended in a torrent of sarcastic abuse from this favorite son of the devil.'

"SWAIN then indulges in some choice abuse of his own. To me," Colton remarked, "it is only too clear that Swain feared and hated this outspoken Scotch geologist because he, Swain, instinctively felt that he was the inferior both physically and morally of this strong lover of strong drink. Of course, if what Swain says is true, McKay did drink too much. But," and the doctor smiled, "I can find little to bear out Swain's assertion that Scotch whiskey made McKay a Son of Satan. On the whole he seems to have been built on a big scale with a heart as big as the rest of him. In justice to McKay I shall skip Swain's ranting and simply tell the main facts of this fine geologist's life as I have learned them from the scientific records."

"Campbell McKay," Big Tom interrupted, "was quite a famous explorer fifteen years ago. Is this the same man?"

"I am sure of it. The well-known McKay disappeared just about the same time as Swain's big friend. There are numerous clues that identify the noted explorer and our Captain.

"Well," Colton continued, "I find that McKay graduated from the University of Edinburgh with high honors in natural science, particularly geology, and at once got a position with the Belgian government, as an assistant in the geological and mining survey of the Congo basin. That job lasted five years. The moment he was foot-free McKay invested all of his savings in outfitting a private exploration party. He hired only blacks. At the head of a considerable safari he made his way northeast through the Congo forest, following, so far as I can judge, practically the same route as ours, except that he penetrated more deeply into the pygmy country.

"He was gone three years. Most of his

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porters died or were killed in the forest, and practically alone he fought his way out to a trading post on the main river. The results of this expedition made him famous. The popular account of his discoveries is summed up in his remarkable book of travels, *The Oldest Race of Men.* In this he proves to the satisfaction of anthropologists that the new races of pygmies discovered by him in the deepest forests of the Congo are undoubtedly far more ancient than any other race, living or extinct, on the African continent, and older, probably, than the cave dwellers of Europe. His book not only made a sensation at the time, but also a considerable amount of money for its author.

"McKay's explorations were really remarkable. Once he came within range of the true wilderness he never followed the trails of previous explorers. With practically no protection he plunged recklessly into unknown forests, or set out across unmapped deserts with barely a week's supply of water. One point is worth noting. Again and again he emphasizes in his books—he wrote several—that he never used force with the native tribes, no matter how savage or how threatening they were. For instance, whilst traversing the forests of his new pygmy races he forbade his blacks even to display firearms, much less use them. Every rifle in his outfit was packed away out of sight at the first sign of human habitation.

"Since our return," the doctor continued, "I have carefully gone through every line McKay ever printed, in the hope of discovering some clue to his savage campaign against the beast men. The best I could find was this curious passage.

" 'On the very edge of the pygmy forest I heard rumors of a powerful "god" somewhere in the interior. As I penetrated deeper into their country, these rumors grew into a definite statement of fact—as definite, that is, as any account of places and distances ever is when given by a primitive people. Becoming interested, I followed up this living legend to its source. Suffice it to say that I discovered the god. But, as Kipling would remark, "that's another story."

" 'I only care to state here, reserving full discussion for a scientific paper in the *Proceedings* of the Royal African Society, that this god of the pygmies is the dirtiest that any race of men ever set up, and that its worship is vile and degrading beyond description. It is my hope to be able to smash this god and once for all break its evil influence over my pugnacious and lovable little friends, the pygmies.

" 'Although they are as vindictive as Dundee wasps they deserve a better god than the rotten abomination they now have. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than the destruction of their horrible creed. To this I shall devote at least one expedition. But, lest any of my readers misunderstand me or my intention, I wish to state emphatically that I am no missionary.' "

"The last sentence," Colton remarked with a smile, "was hardly necessary. McKay's books are as virile as himself and as strong as the whiskey he drank like water.

"Well, at this point I can go on with Swain's account, although I hate to leave McKay's personal narrative. There is adventure enough, and sufficient observation of human character in McKay's journals to make a dozen romances. Swain's next is a curious combination. It starts out with a sermon—which I shall skip, of course—and ends with a confession of petty larceny. Listen to this.

" 'After one of his outbursts of foul abuse of me and my mission, McKay suddenly announced that I should never hear him curse again as he was going to reform. A holy joy filled my soul. At last I had softened that iron heart, and by the example of my zeal brought one more son of Satan to the true fold. He was giving up drink, too, he declared.

" 'I all but wept, to think that it was my humble eloquence which had shown him the sottish error of his ways. All my medical arguments had availed me nothing; McKay was afraid neither of jungle fever nor of delirium tremens. Indeed his resistance was most remarkable. It was my earnest pleading with his higher nature which had won him over. So, in my mistaken folly, I thought. His repentance was a sham, a trick of the devil laughing at me from behind McKay's back. He was giving up drink, he said, because he had found something stronger and infinitely cheaper. No Scotchman, he declared, could resist such an appeal to change his life.

" 'Shortly after this, McKay learned in some way which I have never been able to trace, of my crusade against the apes. I can only surmise that some false con-

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vert in one of the lower tribes betrayed me. McKay called upon me to expostulate. He was calm, although, son of a devil that he was, he saw no evil in evolution. He would have let the apes live, to be a snare to the minds of the ignorant and the young. He had the presumption to call my crusade the stupidest cruelty in history. As if that which saves the souls of millions can be cruel! I disdained argument, waiting for him to leave.

"'God, he said, might or might not "punish" me. The punishment, he declared, should be made to fit the crime. But, he concluded with a sneer, he was no angel from Heaven with a flaming sword in his hand to prick me over the brink of hell. He had simply dropped in, he said, to invite me to come over to his "diggings" and see a remarkable mineral specimen which he had brought back from the pygmy country. Pleased at the compliment of his offer of the olive branch, I gladly accepted. Little did he guess what it was that he showed me! It was the secret key to the Higher Manhood!'

"HERE Swain raves on for pages over this 'higher manhood,'" Colton said. "As you all saw plenty of it in the ravine—those shaggy half-beasts were the new race of supermen—I can blow off all this froth and get down to the beer. He goes on to tell how McKay showed him what looked like an ordinary steamer trunk for the tropics; how this trunk, of great weight, when opened was found to be apparently empty, and how McKay lifted one of the boards in the bottom of it, disclosing the inner lining of sheet steel which gave the trunk its great strength. But, steel and all, the trunk could not have weighed more than a hundred and fifty pounds—and this was an excessive estimate. Still, it taxed all of McKay's great strength to budge the trunk.

"He goes on to tell of the small rivet, no bigger than a tack, of some black, granular metal hammered into the sheet steel of the floor, and asserted by McKay to be the source of all the extraordinary weight. This tack, or rivet, was so placed that when the board was put back in the bottom of the trunk, the top of the rivet fitted a small hole in the board, and protruded like the head of a tack. Upon this tack McKay had fastened his visiting card, by cutting a small hole in the card to fit exactly over the rivet head. The effect was precisely that of a card of identification tacked to the wooden floor of the trunk.

"McKay invited Swain to fill his lungs with the air inside the trunk. Swain did so. His description of the resulting drunkenness is minutely exact. As some of us have had the same experience I can skip everything but his final comment:

"'McKay, in his brutal ignorance, had shown me the key to Paradise. Did he know the treasure which was his? I think not. But I realized instantly that here was the divine fire to purify the soul of man by fear and elevate him to a station but little lower than that of the happy angels. McKay, whiskey-sodden drunkard that he was, could only stand by with an idiotic leer on his face, asking me if it wasn't "a gey great bogey feelin'" I got. He referred, I presume, to the exalted fear which purged my soul like a sweet fire.'

"McKay's game is all clear enough," Colton commented with a dry laugh. "He knew by personal experience the deadly attractiveness of that degrading emanation, and he guessed that Swain's character would not be strong enough to resist a second 'drink' of it. After the fifteenth or sixteenth drink, Swain would be a hopeless addict of the new vice. In a year or so he would be well on his way to the brutes. After that, degenerated nature would take its inevitable course and make Swain something a little lower than the helpless apes he delighted in persecuting.

"McKay, we must remember, had seen what the emanations of asterium do to human beings. He had followed the course of the disease by observation on his vicious little friends the pygmies. So he knew, therefore, what must become of Swain when that unfortunate man, with a character no better than a yellow cur's—if as good—was fully exposed to the temptation. I shall not make any excuses for McKay. But you will agree, I think, that the punishment he prepared for Swain certainly fitted the crime. Swain, the flaming torch kindling the palm leaves at the feet of helpless beasts, was himself to become a beast."

"He got no more than he deserved," was Little Tom's verdict. "He saw one of his intended victims, you must remember."

"Unfortunately Swain did not get all that was intended for him," Colton replied. "McKay's gun was a dandy, but

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his aim wobbled. As usual the innocent bystander got the worst of it. McKay left, shortly afterward, on a new expedition to the pygmies. Before leaving, however, he took special pains to tell Swain where he had stored the steamer trunk with its tack of asterium. He knew perfectly well that Swain was now so far gone in his craving that he would steal the trunk at the first opportunity. He gave Swain every chance. 'Accidentally' he forgot to lock the door of his house when he left on his expedition. The same night Swain was in possession of the trunk. I shall omit his long, rambling justification, based on the Higher Manhood, by which he excuses the theft.

"It is here that the tragedy begins. Swain's seventeen year old daughter Edith, rummaging around in trunks and boxes for bits of ribbon, raised the lid of the interesting looking steamer trunk and got her lungs full of the emanation. The effect varies, it appears, according to the physical condition of the victim. Edith was just right for the fullest action of the degrading influence. Without her parents' knowledge she became a hopeless addict in less than a week.

"The discovery of his daughter's fall gave Swain a shock that brought him, for a moment, to his senses. For a time he saw himself as he was, a spineless sot. He did his best to break the habit and to cure his daughter without her mother's knowledge. He failed, for the simple reason that he never could muster courage to dump the infernal trunk into the river. Mrs. Swain was no fool. Her daughter's condition soon became visible. On investigation she easily found the cause. Swain and the girl were now so far gone that it was not difficult to catch them at their mutual orgies. They had become careless of consequences.

"Mrs. Swain was prostrated. But not for long. Under her husband's evil influence she consented to 'try it just once' —to cheer her up. To make a long story short, she too was a slave to the degenerating vice within a month.

"A hideous struggle now began in that stricken family. First one, then another would swear never to indulge again, and exhort the others to repent and be clean. Mrs. Swain for almost a month actually abstained totally. Edith was the weakest. The stuff took to her brain and body like fire to tinder. Swain himself, appalled at the wreckage of two innocent lives, all but cured himself. Then he fell, lower than ever, only to awake again, like a soul in hell, to vain resolutions which he kept for a month, or a week or a day.

"Not one of the three had the simple courage to throw the cursed stuff away. At last, in desperation, Swain fled with Edith into the forest, leaving his wretched wife to fight her battle alone. He had tried to take her too, but she refused to leave. Swain's idea was that he and Edith might overtake McKay and beg him to tell them the cure. Their faith that he knew a cure was pathetic. McKay had tempted Swain deliberately with an insidious vice which he fully—and correctly—believed to be incurable.

"Swain, we know, was an expert woodsman. He undoubtedly was a far greater natural explorer than McKay, and his knowledge of the native languages was unique. He tells how he and Edith soon got clues of McKay's whereabouts, and at once followed. All this time they were in hell. The girl's sufferings for the vice which she had abandoned in a moment of exaltation drove her to the brink of insanity, possibly over it.

"THEY found McKay's party in the pygmy country not far, I judge, from the iron face. Only Swain's skill as a woodsman had kept him and his daughter alive and safe from the attacks of human beings and animals. By this time, Swain had reasoned himself into a belief that the effect of the emanation was good, not evil. It gave him a feeling of godlike exaltation, he recalled, when he indulged; therefore it must be good, if not wholly godlike itself. I can skip all his drunkard's logic proving that he and Edith were not degenerating, but treading the upward path to a higher humanity.

"This sort of thing is familiar enough to all physicians who have had much to do with fairly well educated drug fiends. By the time they had found McKay, Swain was in no mood for reform. He wanted more of his drug, and he wanted it in a hurry.

"McKay, learning what his self-appointed rôle as avenger of the apes had accomplished, was horror-stricken. He himself was already on the last steep road to hell, and he knew it. Whiskey had been powerless to 'get' him; the new vice found him no stronger than a baby. He was its slave, body, mind and soul. He had explored the cave and found the mass of pure asterium which we first identified as a new element.

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"His long exploration of the cave had put the mark of the beast not only on him, but on his followers. They one and all showed plainly the unmistakable signs of degeneracy. Several had already attained an abnormal growth, and on at least five the coarse gray hair was well started in patches all over their bodies. McKay's speech had already thickened, and he had difficulty in following a simple sentence. But his soul still lived. In this respect he was less far gone than Swain.

"Remorse, as always, was futile. He could not undo the evil he had done. Nor was his befuddled mind capable of refuting Swain's perverted logic. In a dumb way he seems to have grasped the utter depravity of Swain's insane doctrine of a 'Higher Race,' for he awoke to a terrible fury. For an hour or more he became clear, far-seeing, coherent. He made Swain swear by everything that he held sacred to aid him in destroying the evil which was destroying both of them.

"Swain confesses he agreed. His motive, so far as I can judge, was one which any physician who has had drug patients will understand. To get to the source of his vice, Swain would have promised anything. The wretched man swore to help McKay in his campaign of destruction, with his life, if necessary. But before he could help he must see the devil which they were to destroy.

"McKay led him to the god of the pygmies. He himself was on his way to the shrine when Swain and Edith found him. But he was going, not as a breaker of idols, but as a worshipper of evil. For the vice had now got such a hold of him that he was powerless in its fiendish grip.

"They fought their way to the mass of metal. The degenerating human beings in its shadow at first strove to drive out the strange white newcomers. Soon however they accepted them as fellow worshipers. There were no children in that besotted sect. The youngest member, according to Swain, must have been over twenty-five. His guess as to the cause is probably correct. We saw no young, if you remember. All the degraded men and women were fully mature. The degenerating influence of the metal, according to Swain, sterilized its victims.

"Since returning I have found evidence from my specimens that bears out Swain's theory. His daughter therefore was the baby of the community. She became the pet of such of the wretched victims as still retained any human feelings. To show their love, they made way for her at the shrine, letting her saturate herself in the seductive vice which was the one thing of value they had to offer.

"For six weeks the three whites wallowed in the new sin. Swain seems to have been naturally more resistant than either Edith or McKay. His daughter became practically a beast. Five days before her death she lost the power of speech. But for the Captain's—McKay's—sudden and brief recovery, all three might have sunk forever into brutehood without leaving a trace on the tides of human affairs. It was the last, fierce flareup of a dying mind which precipitated the tragedy.

"One terrible morning McKay came to himself. He saw clearly what he was and what he might expect to become. And he knew what Edith, the young girl whom he had often seen and admired for her beauty less than two years previously, he saw, I say, what she already was. He looked at the rapidly degenerating human beings—mostly the pygmies, his former 'children'—pawing their fatal god with hands of bestial reverence.

"Swain, he noted, had still kept his human shape. For he, unfortunate man, was the born addict, the natural drunkard who can sin for years in secret until suddenly the devil he has nourished casually puts out a hand and chokes the reason out of him. But he was still a man, with the reasoning faculties of a human being. McKay looked again at Edith. She was gone, gone forever from the world of human beings. Then suddenly he knew that he too was damned. As surely as this girl had fallen down to brutehood, so too must he fall.

"In the awful lucidity of that knowledge he swore to destroy the fiend which had ruined him. By himself he was powerless. Long before he could reach civilization he knew that he would have lost the power of speech, and possibly also the gift of human reason. While the last fierce rays of absolute knowledge lit his dying mind, he implored Swain to return to his human kind and guide men to the cave and the forest god.

"He gave full and easy directions, and named half a dozen men who would organize an expedition at once in response to his call. These men were to bring explosives to destroy the meteor, or, failing that, to bury it under tons of stone and dirt, and block the entrance to the cave. Swain was to tell everything,

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so that the destroyers should be forewarned and, when they found the evil, spare nothing. Swain promised. Why?

"The reason, as I see it, is rather complex. Swain was moved by remorse over his daughter's fate, fear of McKay, perverted theory that the influence of the emanation was good, not bad, and an honest belief that the black metal was indeed a sort of 'philosopher's stone' transmuting base human nature into a higher state, and last, he was urged to escape from this dangerous place to his own home where he could indulge his vice in safety. For he still had McKay's trunk, unless, in his absence, his wretched wife had conquered her destroyer.

"McKAY, for his part, vowed that, man or beast, so long as he lived he would wage incessant war against the evil. Although he himself should lose all reason, instinct, he declared, would yet survive to guide him in preventing others from following in his footsteps to ruin. He still had his rifle and a few shells; the rest of his baggage had long since been left in the forest by the porters who already were more than half beast. The rifle, he knew, would soon be useless; its simple mechanism would become too complicated for his degenerating brain, and he would lose it, or in a fit of insanity smash the futile encumbrance and hurl it away. While he yet had reason he swore to continue the fight for good against evil. We saw his fight.

"What was to be done with Edith? To take her back to civilization was out of the question; to leave her where she was would be inhuman. Fate, kind for once, solved the insolvable difficulty. McKay, it seems, began his campaign against the degenerating beast men on the day that Swain was to leave. There was a violent struggle round the block of metal. Edith fought with the beast men. In the confusion she was accidentally shot and killed. Swain fled, leaving McKay, stark mad, in possession of the accursed 'idol.'

"Here Swain confesses to one trifling falsehood in what he told us. His daughter was not drowned. Nor was the flake of meteoric iron, which later he stole from Big Tom, obtained by McKay on this occasion. You remember he said that the geologist shot at him, mistaking him for an ape, and chipped off the splinter. It must have been on his first discovery of the meteor that McKay got his specimen. When Swain saw it in Big Tom's possession he lied to excuse his theft later. Probably he thought the phenomenally heavy iron contained a fragment of asterium.

"When Swain reached home he found his wife a hopeless addict. Her condition, he declares, caused him to 'forget' his promise to McKay. At any rate no help was sent the desperate man. Shortly after returning, Swain left Africa and took his wife to America. You can draw your own conclusions. My own is that Swain, finding himself in possession of a sufficient supply of asterium for his own vicious habits, had no occasion for returning to the source of the metal.

"However that may be, and possibly I am too harsh on him, Swain fought a losing battle. His wife's degeneration deterred him from full indulgence. With her example daily before his eyes he feared to let himself go as he really wished to go. Between fits of weakness he elaborated his theory of the new evolution and the Higher Race toward which his vice was leading him.

"All of this is a mere defense mechanism to excuse his lack of character. He was rotten, and he knew it, but he hated to admit it, even to himself. Poor fellow, he paid for his folly. His visit to me was part of his defense. If I found him strong, physically, then it was proved that he had indeed attained the boasted state of super-manhood.

"The Captain's case is more difficult. Was he punished beyond his deserts? Did he deserve any of it? I shall not attempt to say."

"Whatever the Captain did," Lila said softly, "he has amply made good. He kept his vow and destroyed the source of evil. We must go back next year and finish up in the cave."

"Yes," said Little Tom. "As to the Captain, if anyone feels like throwing the first stone, he has my permission. I'm not competing."

"You are all rather lukewarm it seems to me," Big Tom remarked. "Perhaps you are scared of giving yourselves away. As the oldest here let me say what you are all thinking. I have no reputation to lose at my age, so I can be truthful. The Captain was a darned good fellow. If 'gentleman' were not such a priggish word I should call him that."

The End

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The Editor's Page

WITH the March issue, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* was launched under the new standard of Popular Publications—and of course the letters poured in. "The Ark of Fire" proved to be irresistible to practically all of the faithful followers of the magazine.

With equal confidence in its excellence we now present a second great novel in the present issue. The author of "The Iron Star," the celebrated John Taine, when asked to send F.F.M. his autobiography, sent us the following:

The Editor has asked for a short autobiographical sketch. I wish the Editor had asked someone else. Like most men I can say all that is worth saying about myself in less than 10 words—what usually goes on a tombstone, and anyone really interested (I'm not) will know as much about me as I know about myself.

The reader may ask why anyone should indulge in science fiction, either as writer or reader. To be frank, I have not the slightest idea. If anyone can explain why any human being likes this and dislikes that, he will have gone a long way toward understanding why our race acts as it does.

It is not modesty that makes me carry on like this. It is my lifelong experience that the less we know about the men or women who write the stories we read, the better for them and the better for us. Some of the noblest literature ever written is the work of utterly worthless bums. So long as we knew nothing of them, we stomached their writing. But when they revealed themselves in public, somehow we lost interest.

We have had requests for more stories from "The King In Yellow" following the successful printing of "The Demoiselle d'Ys" in the November 1942 issue. "The Yellow Sign" in the present issue is from the same collection. The original volume (now very rare) was printed in 1895 and represents the cornerstone of the successful career of Robert W. Chambers, the well-known novelist. The stories in this book are many of them built around a fictitious volume, the reading of whose contents spells doom to the curious who scan its terrible pages. The forerunner of doom is the acquisition of the mysterious "Yellow Sign" which comes to those unfortunates who have been brought under the spell of the "King in Yellow."

This device of fantasy was also used by the famous H. P. Lovecraft, who invented a similar volume of weird portent entitled "The Necronomicon." This title has now become a byword for the ultra-weird and stories often have been built around the atmosphere evoked by the supposed book, which was purported to have been ancient when the Dark Ages were in their youth.

Many classics of fantasy have come to the attention of the editors for future publishing. "Three Go Back" by J. Leslie Mitchell, a story long acclaimed by fantastic collectors, has much of the atmosphere of A. Merritt's finest works. It has been selected as a fresh and modern work which we shall be proud to present in the next issue of F.F.M.

We have been successful in making connections with the estate of the late William Hope Hodgson in England, and though negotiations are slow because of wartime conditions, we are hoping to bring you some of this great writer's stories.

An occasional story by favorite "new" writers will appear from time to time and your opinions of these are invited by the editors.

Let us add in closing that the second Finlay portfolio has been as great a success as the first one.

Mary Gnaedinger

EDITOR

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Doorway Into Time

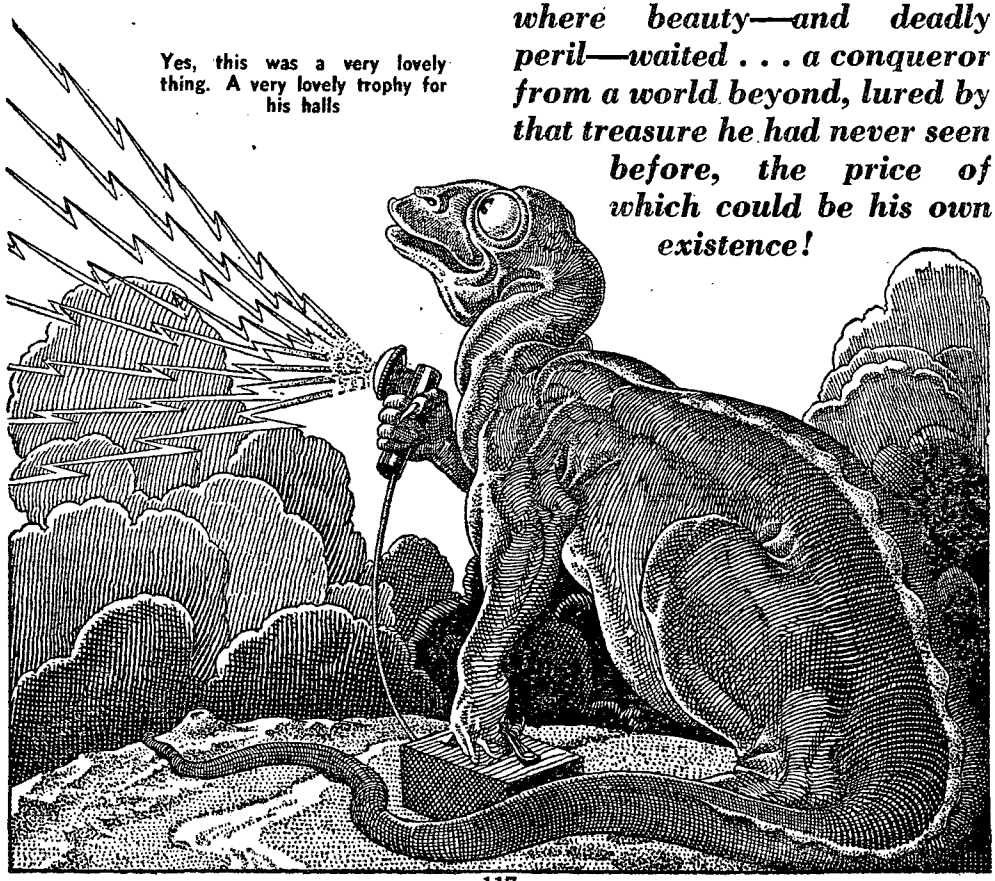
By C. L. Moore

HE CAME slowly, with long, soft, ponderous strides, along the hallway of his treasure house. The gleanings of many worlds were here around him; he had ransacked space and time for the treasures that filled his palace. The robes that moulded their folds richly against his great rolling limbs as he walked were in themselves as priceless as anything within these walls, gossamer fabric pressed into raised designs that had no meaning, this far from the world upon which they had been created, but—in their beauty—universal. But he was himself more beautiful than anything in all that vast collection. He knew it complacently, a warm, contented knowledge deep in the center of his brain.

His motion was beautiful, smooth power pouring along his limbs as he walked, his great bulk ponderous and graceful. The precious robes he wore flowed open over his magnificent body. He ran one sensuous palm down his side, enjoying the texture of that strange, embossed delicacy in a fabric thinner than gauze. His eyes were proud and half shut, flashing many-colored under the heavy lids. The eyes were never twice quite the same color, but all the colors were beautiful.

He was growing restless again. He knew the feeling well, that familiar quiver of discontent widening and strengthening far back in his mind. It

A doorway into time . . . a place where beauty—and deadly peril—waited . . . a conqueror from a world beyond, lured by that treasure he had never seen before, the price of which could be his own existence!



Yes, this was a very lovely thing. A very lovely trophy for his halls

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was time to set out once more on the track of something dangerous. In times past, when he had first begun to stock this treasure house, beauty alone had been enough. It was not enough any longer. Danger had to be there too. His tastes were growing capricious and perhaps a little decadent, for he had lived a very long time.

Yes, there must be risk attending the capture of his next new treasure. He must seek out great beauty and great danger, and subdue the one and win the other, and the thought of it made his eyes change color and the blood beat faster in mighty rhythms through his veins. He smoothed his palm again along the embossed designs of the robe that moulded itself to his body. The great, rolling strides carried him noiselessly over the knife-edged patterns of the floor.

Nothing in life meant much to him any more except these beautiful things which his own passion for beauty had brought together. And even about these he was growing capricious now. He glanced up at a deep frame set in the wall just at the bend of the corridor, where his appreciative eyes could not fail to strike the objects it enclosed at just the proper angle. Here was a group of three organisms fixed in an arrangement that once had given him intense pleasure. On their own world they might have been living creatures, perhaps even intelligent. He neither knew nor cared. He did not even remember now if there had been eyes upon their world to see, or minds to recognize beauty. He cared only that they had given him acute pleasure whenever he turned this bend of the corridor and saw them frozen into eternal perfection in their frame.

But the pleasure was clouded as he looked at them now. His half-shut eyes changed color, shifting along the spectrum from yellow-green to the cooler purity of true green. This particular treasure had been acquired in perfect safety; its value was impaired for him, remembering that. And the quiver of discontent grew stronger in his mind. Yes, it was time to go out hunting again. . . .

And here, set against a panel of velvet, was a great oval stone whose surface exhaled a light as soft as smoke, in waves whose colors changed with languorous slowness. Once the effect had been almost intoxicating to him. He had taken it from the central pavement of a great city square upon a world whose location he had forgotten long ago. He did not know if the people of the city had valued it, or perceived its beauty at all. But he had won it with only a minor skirmish, and now in his bitter mood it was valueless to his eyes.

He quickened his steps, and the whole solid structure of the palace shook just perceptibly underfoot as he moved with ponderous majesty down the hall. He was still running one palm in absent appreciation up and down the robe across his mighty side, but his mind was not on present treasures any more. He was looking to the future, and the color of his eyes had gone shivering up the spectrum to orange, warm with the anticipation of danger. His nostrils flared a little and his wide mouth turned down at the corners in an inverted grimace. The knife-edged patterns of the floor sang faintly beneath his footsteps, their sharp intricacies quivering as the pressure of his steps passed by.

He went past a fountain of colored fire which he had wrecked a city to possess. He thrust aside a hanging woven of unyielding crystal spears which only his great strength could have moved. It gave out showers of colored sparks when he touched it, but their beauty did not delay him now.

His mind had run on ahead of him, into that room in the center of his palace, round and dim, from which he searched the universe for plunder and through whose doorways he set out upon its track. He came ponderously along the hall toward it, passing unheeded treasures, the gossamer of his robes floating after him like a cloud.

On the wall before him, in the dimness of the room, a great circular screen looked out opaquely, waiting his touch. A doorway into time and space. A doorway to beauty and deadly peril and everything that made livable for him a life which had perhaps gone on too long already. It took strong measures now to stir the jaded senses which once had responded so eagerly to more stimuli than he could remember any more. He sighed, his great chest expanding tremendously. Somewhere beyond that screen, upon some world he had never trod before, a treasure was waiting lovely enough to tempt his boredom and dangerous enough to dispel it for just a little while.

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THE screen brightened as he neared the wall. Blurred shadows moved, vague sounds drifted into the room. His wonderful senses sorted the noises and the shapes and dismissed them as they formed; his eyes were round and luminous now, and the orange fires deepened as he watched. Now the shadows upon the screen moved faster. Something was taking shape. The shadows leaped backward into three-dimensional vividness that wavered for a moment and then sharpened into focus upon a desert landscape under a vivid crimson sky. Out of the soil a cluster of tall flowers rose swaying, exquisitely shaped, their colors shifting in that strange light. He glanced at them carelessly and grimaced. And the screen faded.

He searched the void again, turning up scene after curious scene and dismissing each with a glance. There was a wall of carved translucent panels around a city he did not bother to identify. He saw a great shining bird that trailed luminous plumage, and a tapestry woven gorgeously with scenes from no earthly legend, but he let all of them fade again without a second look, and the orange glow in his eyes began to dull with boredom.

Once he paused for a while before the picture of a tall, dark idol carved into a shape he did not recognize, its strange limbs adorned with jewels that dripped fire, and for an instant his pulse quickened. It was pleasant to think of those jewels upon his own great limbs, trailing drops of flame along his halls. But when he looked again he saw that the idol stood deserted upon a barren world, its treasure his for the taking. And he knew that so cheap a winning would be savorless. He sighed again, from the depths of his mighty chest, and let the screen shift its pictures on.

It was the faraway flicker of golden lightning in the void that first caught his eyes, the distant scream of it from some world without a name. Idly he let the screen's shadows form a picture. First was the lightning, hissing and writhing from a mechanism which he spared only one disinterested glance. For beside it two figures were taking shape, and as he watched them his restless motions stilled and the floating robe settled slowly about his body. His eyes brightened to orange again. He stood very quiet, staring.

The figures were of a shape he had not seen before. Remotely like his own, but flexible and very slender, and of proportions grotesquely different from his. And one of them, in spite of its difference, was— He stared thoughtfully. Yes, it was beautiful. Excitement began to kindle behind his quietness. And the longer he stared the clearer the organism's subtle loveliness grew. No obvious flamboyance like the fire-dripping jewels or the gorgeously plumed bird, but a delicate beauty of long, smooth curves and tapering lines, and colors in softly blended tints of apricot and creamy white and warm orange-red. Folds of blue-green swathing it were probably garments of some sort. He wondered if it were intelligent enough to defend itself, or if the creature beside it, making lightnings spurt out of the mechanism over which it bent, would know or care if he reached out to take its companion away.

He leaned closer to the screen, his breath beginning to come fast and his eyes glowing with the first flush of red that meant excitement. Yes, this was a lovely thing. A very lovely trophy for his halls. Briefly he thought of it arranged in a frame whose ornaments would echo the soft and subtle curves of the creature itself, colored to enhance the delicacy of the subject's coloring. Certainly a prize worth troubling himself for—if there were danger anywhere near to make it a prize worth winning. . . .

He put one hand on each side of the screen and leaned forward into it a little, staring with eyes that were a dangerous scarlet now. That flare of lightning looked like a weapon of some sort. If the creatures had intelligence— It would be amusing to test the limits of their minds, and the power of the weapon they were using. . . .

He watched a moment longer, his breath quickening. His mighty shoulders hunched forward. Then with one shrug he cast off the hampering garment of gossamer and laughed deep in his throat and lunged smoothly forward into the open doorway of the screen. He went naked and weaponless, his eyes blazing scarlet. This was all that made life worth living. Danger, and beauty beyond danger. . . .

Darkness spun around him. He shot forward through dimensionless infinity along a corridor of his own devising.

THE girl leaned back on her metal bench and crossed one beautiful long leg over the other, stirring the sequined

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folds of her gown into flashing motion.

"How much longer, Paul?" she asked.

The man glanced over his shoulder and smiled.

"Five minutes. Look away now—I'm going to try it again." He reached up to slip a curved, transparent mask forward, closing his pleasant, dark face away from the glare. The girl sighed and shifted on the bench, averting her eyes.

The laboratory was walled and ceiled in dully reflecting metal, so that the blue-green blur of her gown moved as if in dim mirrors all around her when she changed position. She lifted a bare arm to touch her hair, and saw the reflections lift too, and the pale blur that was her hair, shining ashes of silver and elaborately coiffed.

The murmur of well-oiled metal moving against metal told her that a lever had been shifted, and almost instantly the room was full of a golden glare, like daylight broken into hissing fragments as jagged as lightning. For a long moment the walls quivered with light and sound. Then the hissing died, the glare faded. A smell of hot metal tainted the air.

The man sighed heavily with satisfaction and lifted both hands to pull the mask off. Indistinctly behind the glass she heard him say:

"Well, that's done. Now we can—"

But he never finished, and the helmet remained fixed on his shoulders as he stared at the wall they were both facing. Slowly, almost absentmindedly, he pushed aside the glass across his face, as if he thought it might be responsible for the thing they both saw. For above the banked machinery which controlled the mechanism he had just released, a shadow had fallen upon the wall. A great circle of shadow. . . .

Now it was a circle of darkness, as if twilight had rushed timelessly into midnight before them as they watched, and a midnight blacker than anything earth ever knew. The midnight of the ether, of bottomless spaces between worlds. And now it was no longer a shadow, but a window opening upon that midnight, and the midnight was pouring through. . . .

Like smoke the darkness flowed in upon them, dimming the glitter of machinery, dimming the girl's pale hair and pale, shining shoulders and the shimmer of her gown until the man looked at her as if through veil upon veil of falling twilight.

Belatedly he moved, making a useless gesture of brushing the dark away with both hands before his face.

"Alanna—" he said helplessly. "What's happened? I—I can't see—very well—"

He heard her whimper in bewilderment, putting her own hands to her eyes as if she thought blindness had come suddenly upon them both. He was too sick with sudden dizziness to move or speak. This, he told himself wildly, must be the blindness that foreruns a swoon, and his obedient mind made the floor seem to tilt as if the faintness and blindness were inherent in himself, and not the result of some outward force.

But before either of them could do more than stammer a little, as their minds tried desperately to rationalize what was happening into some weakness of their own senses, the dark was complete. The room brimmed with it, and sight ceased to exist.

When the man felt the floor shake, he thought for an unfathomable moment that it was his own blindness, his own faintness again, deceiving his senses. The floor could not shake, as if to a ponderous tread. For there was no one here but themselves—there could not be great footfalls moving softly through the dark, making the walls shudder a little as they came. . . .

Alanna's caught breath was clear in the silence. Not terror at first; but surprised inquiry. She said, "Paul— Paul, don't—"

And then he heard the beginning of her scream. He heard the beginning, but incredibly, he never heard the scream's end. One moment the full-throated roundness of her cry filled the room, pouring from a throat stretched wide with terror; the next, the sound diminished and vanished into infinite distances, plummeting away from him and growing thin and tiny while the echo of its first sound still rang through the room. The impossibility of such speed put the last touch of nightmare upon the whole episode. He did not believe it.

The dark was paling again. Rubbing his eyes, still not sure at all that this had not been some brief aberration of his own senses, he said, "Alanna—I thought—"

But the twilight around him was empty.

HE HAD no idea how long a while elapsed between that moment and the moment when he stood up straight

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at last, facing the wall upon which the shadow still lay. In between there must have been a period of frantic search, of near hysteria and self-doubt and reeling disbelief. But now, as he stood looking up at the wall upon which the shadow still hung blackly, drawing into itself the last veils of twilight from the corners of the room, he ceased to rationalize or disbelieve.

Alanna was gone. Somehow, impossibly, in the darkness that had come upon them a Something with great silent feet that trod ponderously, shaking the walls, had seized her in the moment when she said, "Paul—" thinking it was himself. And while she screamed, it had vanished into infinite distances out of this room, carrying her with it.

That it was impossible he had no time to consider. He had time now only to realize that nothing had passed him toward the door, and that the great circle upon the wall before him was—an entrance?—out of which Something had come and into which Something must have retreated again—and not alone. . . .

And the entrance was closing.

He took one step toward it, unreasoning and urgent, and then stumbled over the boxed instrument which he had been testing just before insanity entered the room. The sight and feel of it brought back his own sanity a little. Here was a weapon; it offered a grip upon slipping reality to know that he was not wholly helpless. Briefly he wondered whether any weapon at all would avail against That which came in impossible darkness on feet that made no sound, though their tread shook the foundations of the building. . . .

But the weapon was heavy. And how far away from the parent machine would it work? With shaking fingers he groped for the carrying handle. He staggered a little, lifting it, but he turned toward the end of the room where the great circle drank in the last of its twilight and began imperceptibly to pale upon the wall. If he were to follow, to take That which had gone before him by surprise, he must go swiftly. . . .

One glance at the lever of the parent machine, to be sure it was thrown full over, for the weapon itself drank power from that source alone—if it would drink power at all in the unfathomable distances to which he was going. . . . One last unbelieving glance around the room, to be quite sure Alanna was really gone—

The lower arc of the circle was a threshold opening upon darkness. He could not think that he would pass it, this flat shadow upon the flat and solid wall, but he put out one hand uncertainly and took a step forward, and another, bent to the weight of the box he carried. . . .

But there was no longer any weight. Nor was there any light nor sound—only wild, whirling motion that spun him over and over in the depths of his blindness. Spun interminably—spun for untimed eons that passed in the flash of an eye. And then—

"Paul! Oh, Paul!"

He stood reeling in a dim, round room walled with strange designs he could not quite focus upon. He had no sense that was not shaken intolerably; even sight was not to be relied upon just now. He thought he saw Alanna in the dimness, pale hair falling over her pale, shining shoulders, her face distorted with bewilderment and terror. . . .

"Paul! Paul, answer me! What is it? What's happened?"

He could not speak yet. He could only shake his head and cling by blind instinct to the weight that dragged down upon one arm. Alanna drew her bare shoulders together under the showering hair and hugged herself fearfully, the creamy arms showing paler circles where her fingertips pressed them hard. Her teeth were chattering, though not from cold.

"How did we get here?" she was saying. "How did we get here, Paul? We'll have to go back, won't we? I wonder what's happened to us?" The words were almost aimless, as if the sound of speech itself were more important to her now than any sense of what she was saying. "Look behind you, Paul—see? We came out of—there."

He turned. A great circle of mirror rose behind him on the dim wall, but a mirror reversed, so that it reflected not themselves, but the room they had just left.

Clearer than a picture—he looked into it—his laboratory walls shining with dull reflections, his batteries and dials, and the lever standing up before them that meant the heavy thing he carried would be deadly—perhaps. Deadly? A weapon in a dream? Did they even know that the Something which dwelt here was inimical?

But this was ridiculous. It was too soon yet to accept the fact that they were

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standing here at all. In reality, of course, they must both be back in the laboratory, and both of them dreaming the same strange dream. And he felt, somehow, that to treat all this as a reality would be dangerous. For if he accepted even by implication that such a thing could be true, then perhaps—perhaps. . . . Could acceptance make it *come* true?

He set his weapon down and rubbed his arm dazedly, looking around. Words did not come easily yet, but he had to ask one question.

"That—that thing, Alanna. What was it? How did you—"

She gripped her own bare arms harder, and another spasm of shuddering went over her. The blue-green sequins flashed chilly star-points from her gown as she moved. Her voice shook too; her very mind seemed to be shaking behind the blank eyes. But when she spoke the words made approximate sense. And they echoed his own thought.

"I'm dreaming all this, you know." Her voice sounded far away. "This isn't really happening. But—but *something* took me in its arms back there." She nodded toward the mirrored laboratory on the wall. "And everything whirled, and then—" A hard shudder seized her. "I don't know. . . ."

"Did you see it?"

She shook her head. "Maybe I did. I'm not sure. I was so dizzy—I think it went away through that door. Would you call it a door?" Her little breath of laughter was very near hysteria. "I—I felt its feet moving away."

"But what was it? What did it look like?"

"I don't know, Paul."

He closed his lips on the questions that rushed to be asked. Here in the dream, many things were very alien indeed. Those patterns on the wall, for instance. He thought he could understand how one could look at something and not be sure at all what the something was. And Alanna's heavy spasms of shuddering proved that shock must have blanked her mind protectively to much of what had happened. She said:

"Aren't we going back now, Paul?" And her eyes flickered past him to the pictured laboratory. It was a child's question; her mind was refusing to accept anything but the barest essentials of their predicament. But he could not answer. His first impulse was to say, "Wait—we'll wake up in a minute." But suppose they did not? Suppose they were trapped here? And if the Thing came back. . . . Heavily, he said:

"Of course it's a dream, Alanna. But while it lasts I think we'll have to act as if it were real. I don't want to—" The truth was, he thought, he was afraid to. "But we must. And going back wouldn't do any good as long as we go on dreaming. *It* would just come after us again."

It would come striding through the dream to drag them back, and after all people have died in their sleep—died in their dreams, he thought.

He touched the unwieldy weapon with his toe, thinking silently, "This will help us—maybe. If anything can, it will. And if it won't—well, neither will running away." And he glanced toward the high, distorted opening that must be a doorway into some other part of this unimaginable, dream-created building. It had gone that way, then. Perhaps they should follow. Perhaps their greatest hope of waking safely out of this nightmare lay in acting rashly, in following with the weapon before it expected them to follow. It might not guess his own presence here at all. It must have left Alanna alone in this dim room, intending to return, not thinking to find her with a defender, or to find the defender armed. . . .

But was he armed? He grinned wryly.

Perhaps he ought to test the weapon. And yet, for all he knew, the Thing's strange, alien gaze might be upon him now. He was aware of a strong reluctance to let it know that he had any defense against it. Surprise—that was important. Keep it a secret until he needed a weapon, if he ever did need one. Very gently he pressed the trigger of the lens that had poured out lightnings in the faraway sanity of his laboratory. Would it work in—a dream? For a long moment nothing happened. Then, faintly and delicately against his palm he felt the tubing begin to throb just a little. It was as much of an answer as he dared take now. Some power was there. Enough? He did not know. It was unthinkable, really, that he should ever need to know. Still—

"Alanna," he said, "I think we'd better explore a little. No use just standing here waiting for *it* to come back. It may be perfectly friendly, you know. Dream creatures often are. But I'd like to see what's outside."

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"We'll wake up in a minute," she assured him between chattering teeth. "I'm all right, I think, really. Just—just nervous." He thought she seemed to be rousing from her stupor. Perhaps the prospect of action—any action—even rashness like this, was better for them both than inactivity. He felt surer of himself as he lifted the heavy weapon.

"But Paul, we can't!" She turned, halfway to the door, and faced him. "Didn't I tell you? I tried that before you came. There's a corridor outside, with knives all over the floor. Patterns of them, sharp-edged spirals and—and shapes. Look." She lifted her sparkling skirt a little and put out one foot. He could see the clean, sharp lacerations of the leather sole. His shoulders sagged a bit. Then:

"Well, let's look anyhow. Come on."

THE corridor stretched before them, swimming in purple distances, great gothic hollows and arches melting upon arches. There were things upon the walls. Like the patterns in the room behind them, many were impossible to focus upon directly, too different from anything in human experience to convey meaning to the brain. The eye perceived them blankly, drawing no conclusions. He thought vaguely that the hall looked like a museum, with those great frames upon the walls.

Beside the door another tall frame leaned, empty. About six feet high, it was, deep enough for a man to lie down in, and all around its edges an elaborate and beautiful decoration writhed, colored precisely like Alanna's blue-green gown. Interwoven in it were strands of silver, the color of her pale and shining hair.

"It looks like a coffin," Alanna said aimlessly. Some very ugly thought stirred in Paul's mind. He would not recognize it; he pushed it back out of sight quickly, but he was gladder now that he had brought this lightning-throwing weapon along.

The hall shimmered with strangeness before them. So many things he could not quite see clearly, but the razor-edged decorations of the floor were clear enough. It made the mind reel a little to think what utter alienage lay behind the choice of such adornment for a floor that must be walked upon—even in a dream. He thought briefly of the great earth-shaking feet in the darkness of his laboratory. Here in the dream they walked this knife-edged floor. They must. But how?

The spirals of the pattern lay in long loops and rosettes. After a moment, eyeing them, he said, "I think we can make it, Alanna. If we walk between the knives—see, there's space if we're careful." And if they were not careful, if they had to run. . . . "We've got to risk it," he said aloud, and with those words admitted to himself for perhaps the first time an urgency in this dream, risk and danger. . . . He took a firmer grip upon his burden and stepped delicately into the hollow of a steely spiral. Teetering a little, clutching at his arm to steady herself, Alanna came after him.

Silence—vast, unechoing hollows quivering with silence all around them. They advanced very slowly, watching wide-eyed for any signs of life in the distances, their senses strained and aching with the almost subconscious awareness of any slightest motion in the floor that might herald great feet ponderously approaching. But That which had opened the doorway for them had gone now, for a little while, and left them to their own devices.

Paul carried the lens of his weapon ready in his free hand, the lightest possible pressure always on its trigger so that the tubing throbbed faintly against his palm. That reassurance that contact still flowed between his faraway laboratory and this unbelievable hall was all that kept him forging ahead over the razory mosaics.

They went slowly, but they passed many very strange things. A tremendous transparent curtain swung from the vaulted ceiling in folds as immovable as iron. They slipped through the little triangle of opening where the draperies hung awry, and a shower of fiery sparkles sprang out harmlessly when they brushed the sides. They passed a fountain that sent up gushes of soundless flame from its basin in the center of the corridor floor. They saw upon the walls, in frames and without them, things too alien to think about clearly. That very alienage was worrying the man. In dreams one rehearses the stimuli of the past, fears and hopes and memories. But how *could* one dream of things like these? Where in any human past could such memories lie?

They skirted an oval stone set in the floor, the metal patterns swirling about it. They were both dizzy when they looked directly at it. Dangerous dizziness,

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since a fall here must end upon razor edges. And once they passed an indescribable something hanging against a black panel of the wall, that brought tears to the eyes with its sheer loveliness, a thing of unbearable beauty too far removed from human experience to leave any picture in their minds once they had gone past it. Only the emotional impact remained, remembered beauty too exquisite for the mind to grasp and hold. And the man knew definitely now that this at least was no part of any human memory, and could be in itself no dream.

They saw it all with the strange clarity and vividness of senses sharp with uncertainty and fear, but they saw it too with a dreamlike haziness that faded a little as they went on. To the man, a terrible wonder was dawning. Could it, after all, be a dream? Could it possibly be some alien reality into which they had stumbled? And the import of that frame outside the door they had left—the frame shaped like a coffin and adorned with the colors of Alanna's gown and hair. . . . Deep in his mind he knew what that frame was for. He knew he was walking through a museum filled with lovely things, and he was beginning to suspect why Alanna had been brought here too. The thing seemed unthinkable, even in a dream as mad as this, and yet—

"Look, Paul." He glanced aside. Alanna had reached up to touch a steel-blue frame upon the wall, its edges enclosing nothing but a dim rosy shimmer. She was groping inside it, her face animated now. No thought had come to her yet about that other frame, evidently. No thought that from this dream neither of them might ever wake. . . .

"Look," she said. "It seems empty, but I can *feel* something—something like feathers. What do you suppose—"

"Don't try to suppose," he said almost brusquely. "There isn't any sense to any of this."

"But some of the things are so pretty, Paul. See that—that snowstorm ahead, between the pillars?"

He looked. Veiling the hallway a little distance away hung a shower of patterned flakes, motionless in midair. Perhaps they were embroideries upon some gossamer drapery too sheer to see. But as he looked he thought he saw them quiver just a little. Quiver, and fall quiet, and then quiver again, as if—as if—

"Paul!"

Everything stopped dead still for a moment. He did not need Alanna's whisper to make his heart pause as he strained intolerably to hear, to see, to feel. . . . Yes, definitely now the snowstorm curtain shook. And the floor shook with it in faint rhythms to that distant tremor—

This is it, he thought. *This is real.*

He had known for minutes now that he was not walking through a dream. He stood in the midst of impossible reality, and the Enemy itself came nearer and nearer with each great soundless footfall, and there was nothing to do but wait. Nothing at all. It wanted Alanna. He knew why. It would not want himself, and it would brush him away like smoke in its juggernaut striding to seize her, unless his weapon could stop it. His heart began to beat with heavy, thick blows that echoed the distant footsteps.

"Alanna," he said, hearing the faintest possible quiver in his voice. "Alanna, get behind something—that pillar over there. Don't make a sound. And if I tell you—*run!*"

He stepped behind a nearer pillar, his arm aching from the weight of his burden, the lens of it throbbing faintly against his palm with its promise of power in leash. He thought it would work. . . .

THERE was no sound of footfalls as the rhythm grew stronger. Only by the strength of those tremors that shook the floor could he judge how near the Thing was drawing. The pillar itself was shaking now, and the snowstorm was convulsed each time a mighty foot struck the floor soundlessly. Paul thought of the knife-edged patterns which those feet were treading with such firm and measured strides.

For a moment of panic he regretted his daring in coming to meet the Thing. He was sorry they had not stayed cowering in the room of the mirror—sorry they had not fled back down the whirling darkness through which they came. But you can't escape a nightmare. He held his lensed weapon throbbing like a throat against his palm, waiting to pour out lightning upon—what?

Now it was very close. Now it was just beyond the snowstorm between the pillars. He could see dim motion through their veil. . . .

Snow swirled away from its mighty shoulders, clouded about its great head so that he could not see very clearly what it was that stood there, tall and

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grotesque and terrible, its eyes shining scarlet through the veil. He was aware only of the eyes, and of the being's majestic bulk, before his hand of its own volition closed hard upon the pulse of violence in his palm.

For one timeless moment nothing happened. He was too stunned with the magnitude of the thing he faced to feel even terror at his weapon's failure; awe shut out every other thought. He was even a little startled when the glare of golden daylight burst hissing from his hand, splashing its brilliance across the space between them.

Then relief was a weakness that loosened all his muscles as he played the deadliness of his weapon upon the Enemy, hearing the air shriek with its power, seeing the stone pillars blacken before those lashes of light. He was blinded by their glory; he could only stand there pouring the lightnings forth and squinting against their glare. The smell of scorched metal and stone was heavy in the air, and he could hear the crash of a falling column somewhere, burned through by the blast of the flame. Surely *it* too must be consumed and falling. . . . Hope began to flicker in his brain.

It was Alanna's whimper that told him something must still be wrong. Belatedly he reached up to close the glass visor of the mask he still wore, and by magic the glare ceased to blind him. He could see between the long, writhing whips of light—see the pillars falling and the steel patterns of the floor turn blue and melt away. But he could see it standing between those crumbling pillars now. . . .

He could see it standing in the full bath of the flames, see them splash upon its mighty chest and sluice away over its great shoulders like the spray of water, unheeded, impotent.

Its eyes were darkening from crimson to an angry purple as it lurched forward one ponderous, powerful stride, brushing away the sparks from its face, putting out a terrible arm. . . .

"Alanna—" said the man in a very quiet voice, pitched below the screaming of the flame. "Alanna—you'd better start back. I'll hold it while I can. You'd better run, Alanna. . . ."

He did not know if she obeyed. He could spare no further attention from the desperate business at hand, to delay it—to hold it back even for sixty seconds—for thirty seconds—for one breath more of independent life. What might happen after that he could not let himself think. Perhaps not death—perhaps something far more alien and strange than death. . . . He knew the struggle was hopeless and senseless, but he knew he must struggle on while breath remained in him.

There was a narrow place in the corridor between himself and it. The lightning had weakened one wall already. He swung it away from the oncoming colossus and played the fire screaming to and fro upon blackened stones, seeing mortar crumble between them and girders bending in that terrible heat.

The walls groaned, grinding their riven blocks surface against surface. Slowly, slowly they leaned together; slowly they fell. Stone dust billowed in a cloud to hide the final collapse of the corridor, but through it the scream of lightnings sounded and the shriek of metal against falling stone. And then, distantly, a deeper groaning of new pressure coming to bear.

The man stood paralyzed for a moment, dizzy with an unreasonable hope that he had stopped the Enemy at last, not daring to look too closely for fear of failure. But hope and despair came almost simultaneously into his mind as he watched the mass of the closed walls shuddering and resisting for a moment—but only for a moment.

With dust and stone blocks and steel girders falling away from its tremendous shoulders, it stepped through the ruined arch. Jagged golden lightnings played in its face, hissing and screaming futilely. It ignored them. Shaking off the débris of the wall, it strode forward, eyes purple with anger, great hands outstretched.

And so the weapon failed. He loosed the trigger, hearing its shriek die upon the air as the long ribbons of lightning faded. It was instinct, echoing over millenniums from the first fighting ancestor of mankind, that made him swing the heavy machine overhead with both hands and hurl it into the face of the Enemy. And it was a little like relinquishing a living comrade to let the throb of that fiery tubing lose contact with his palm at last.

Blindly he flung the weapon from him, and in the same motion whirled and ran. The knife-edged floor spun past below him. If he could hit a rhythm to carry him from loop to empty loop of the pattern, he might even reach the room at

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the end of the passage— There was no sanctuary anywhere, but unreasoning instinct made him seek the place of his origin here. . . .

Ahead of him a flutter of blue-green sequins now and then told him that Alanna was running too, miraculously keeping her balance on the patterned floor. He could not look up to watch her. His eyes were riveted to the spirals and loops among which his precarious footing lay. Behind him great feet were thudding soundlessly, shaking the floor.

The things that happened then happened too quickly for the brain to resolve into any sequence at all. He knew that the silence which had flowed back when the screaming lightnings died was suddenly, shockingly broken again by a renewed screaming. He remembered seeing the metal patterns of the floor thrown into sharp new shadows by the light behind him, and he knew that the Enemy had found the trigger he had just released, that his weapon throbbed now against an alien hand.

But it happened in the same instant that the doorway of the entrance room loomed up before him, and he hurled himself desperately into the dimness after Alanna, knowing his feet were cut through and bleeding, seeing the dark blotches of the tracks she too was leaving. The mirror loomed before them, an unbearable picture of the lost familiar room he could not hope to enter again in life.

And all this was simultaneous with a terrifying soundless thunder of great feet at his very heels, of a mighty presence suddenly and ponderously in the same room with them, like a whirlwind exhausting the very air they gasped to breathe. He felt anger eddying about him without words or sound. He felt monstrous hands snatch him up as if a tornado had taken him into its windy grasp. He remembered purple eyes glaring through the dimness in one brief instant of perception before the hands hurled him away.

He spun through empty air. Then a howling vortex seized him and he was falling in blindness, stunned and stupefied, through the same strange passageway that had brought him here. Distantly he heard Alanna scream.

THERE was silence in the dim, round room in the center of the treasure house, except for a muffled howling from the screen. He who was master here stood quietly before it, his eyes half shut and ranging down the spectrum from purple to red, and then swiftly away from red through orange to a clear, pale, tranquil yellow. His chest still heaved a little with the excitement of that minor fiasco which he had brought upon himself, but it was an excitement soon over, and wholly disappointing.

He was a little ashamed of his momentary anger. He should not have played the little creatures' puny lightnings upon them as they fell down the shaft of darkness. He had misjudged their capacity, after all. They were not really capable of giving him a fight worth while.

It was interesting that one had followed the other, with its little weapon that sparkled and stung, interesting that one fragile being had stood up to him.

But he knew a moment's regret for the beauty of the blue-and-white creature he had flung away. The long, smooth lines of it, the subtle coloring. . . . Too bad that it had been worthless because it was helpless too.

Helpless against himself, he thought, and equally against the drive of its own mysterious motives. He sighed.

He thought again, almost regretfully, of the lovely thing he had coveted hurtling away down the vortex with lightnings bathing it through the blackness.

Had he destroyed it? He did not know. He was a little sorry now that anger for his ruined treasures had made him lose his temper when they ran. Futile, scuttling little beings—they had cheated him out of beauty because of their own impotence against him, but he was not even angry about that now. Only sorry, with vague, confused sorrows he did not bother to clarify in his mind. Regret for the loss of a lovely thing, regret that he had expected danger from them and been disappointed, regret perhaps for his own boredom, that did not bother any longer to probe into the motives of living things. He was growing old indeed.

The vortex still roared through the darkened screen. He stepped back from it, letting opacity close over the surface of the portal, hushing all sound. His eyes were a tranquil yellow. Tomorrow he would hunt again, and perhaps tomorrow. . . .

He went out slowly, walking with long, soundless strides that made the steel mosaics sing faintly beneath his feet.

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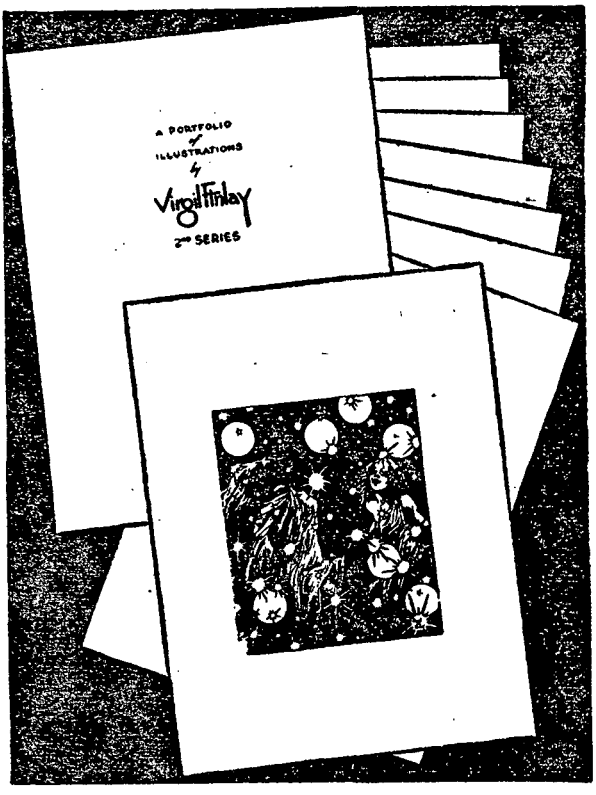

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Dwellers in the Mirage

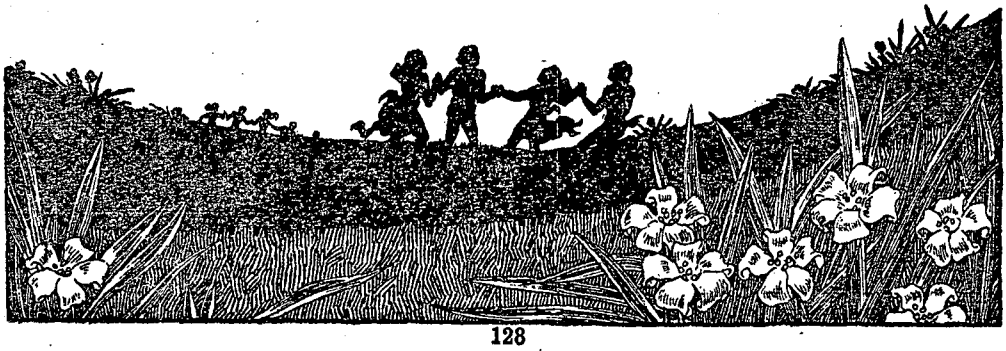
By Nanek

DOWN to the glowing mist, shimmering emerald-blue,
Starless valley with evil kissed, came Leif and Tsantawu;
Heeding the call of,
The terrible thrall of
Khalk'ru.

And drum against song, Rrrllya against the Ayjir,
Dwayanu hath slept too long, he wakes in the arms of Lur,
Who rides with her wolves behind,
Witch-woman and her kind,
Khalk'ru.

The strife and battle are over, drums mourn for Evalie,
Dwayanu is Leif her lover, too late, too late, ai!
And the white wolf rests
On Lur's white breasts,
Khalk'ru.

Ah, Lur, you were wholly woman, and woman must ever forgive;
What if you were barely human, I would that you might have lived.
Falcon and wolf and spirit lake,
Ah, Lur, how my heart doth ache!
Khalk'ru.



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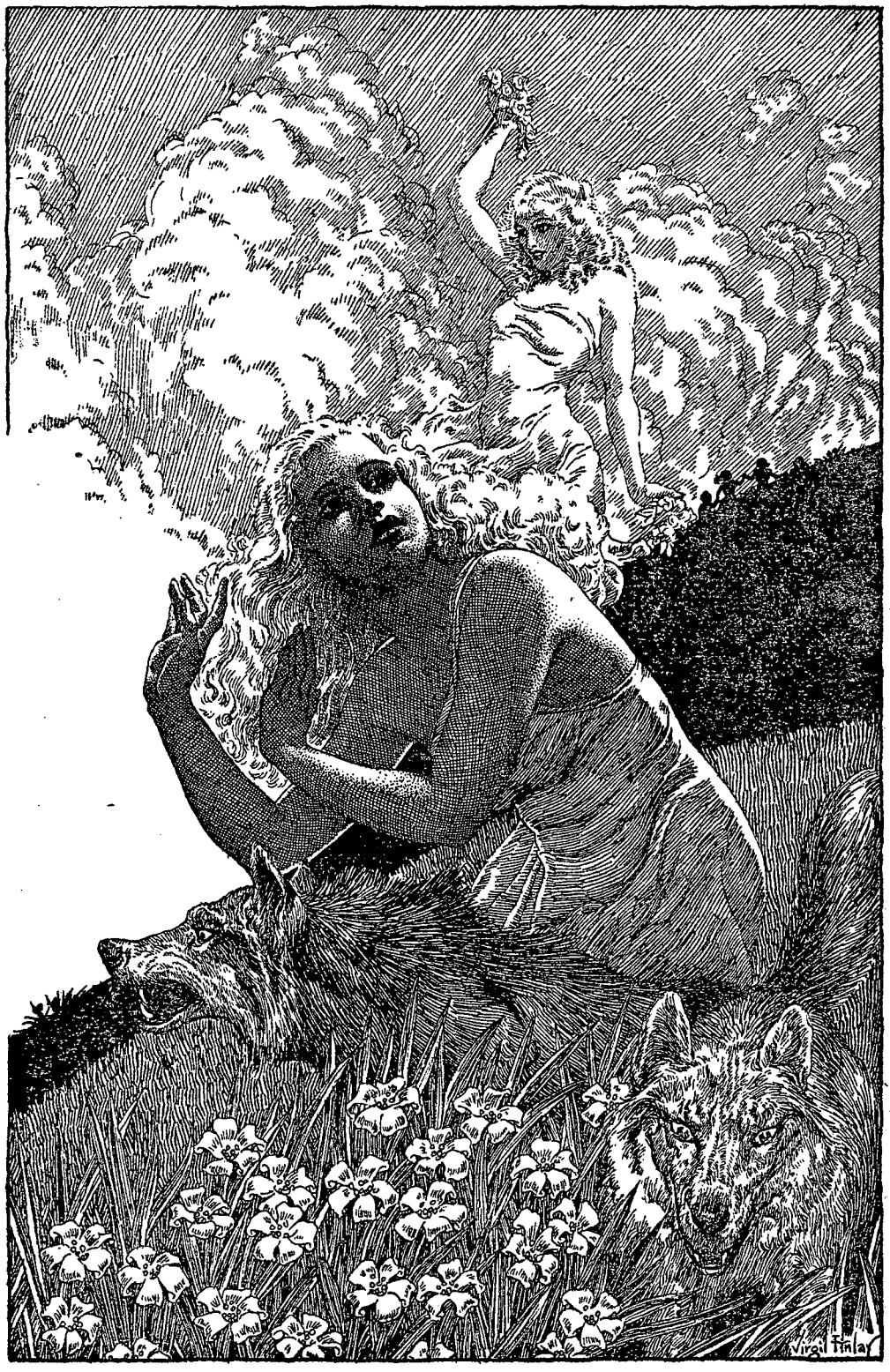

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Why do certain chords of music evoke certain weird and unknown scenes?

THE YELLOW SIGN

By Robert W. Chambers

CHAPTER I

THERE are so many things which are impossible to explain! Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and golden tints of autumn foliage? Why should the Mass of Sainte-Cécile send my thoughts wandering among caverns whose walls blaze with ragged masses of virgin silver? What was it in the roar and turmoil of Broadway at six o'clock that flashed before my eyes the picture of a still Breton forest where sunlight filtered through spring foliage, and Sylvia bent, half curiously, half tenderly, over a small, green lizard, murmuring, "To think that this also is a little ward of God"?

Presented from "The King in Yellow," through the courtesy of The Appleton-Century Company. Copyrighted by the Estate of Robert W. Chambers.

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"Along the shore the cloud waves break,
The twin suns sink behind the lake,
The shadows lengthen
In Carcosa.

"Strange is the night where black stars rise
And strange moons circle through the skies,
But stranger still is
Lost Carcosa.

"Songs that the Hyades shall sing,
Where flap the tatters of the King,
Must die unheard in
Dim Carcosa.

"Song of my soul, my voice is dead,
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed
Shall dry and die in
Lost Carcosa."

—Cassilda's song in "The King in Yellow,"
ACT I., SCENE 2.

"I crept, shaking, to my door, and bolted it, but I knew no bolt, no locks, could keep that creature out. . . . The King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle, and there was only God to cry to now!"

When I first saw the watchman his back was toward me, I looked at him indifferently, until he went into the church. I paid no more attention to him than I had to any other man who lounged through Washington Square that morning, and when I shut my window and turned back into my studio I had forgotten him. Late in the afternoon, the day being warm, I raised the window again and leaned out to get a sniff of air. A man was standing in the courtyard of the church, and I noticed him again with as little interest as I had that morning. I looked across the square to where the fountain was playing, and then, with my mind filled with vague impressions of trees, asphalt drives, and the moving groups of nursemaids and holiday-makers, I started to walk back to my easel.

As I turned, my listless glance included the man below in the church-yard. His face was towards me now, and with a perfectly involuntary movement I bent to see it. At the same moment he raised his head and looked at me. Instantly I thought of a coffin-worm. Whatever it was about the man that repelled me, I did not know, but the impression of a plump, white grave-worm was so intense and nauseating that I must have shown it in my expression, for he turned his puffy face away with a movement which made me think of a disturbed grub in a chestnut.

I went back to my easel and motioned

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the model to resume her pose. After working awhile, I was satisfied that I was spoiling what I had done as rapidly as possible, and I took up a palette-knife and scraped the color out again. The flesh tones were sallow and unhealthy, and I did not understand how I could have painted such sickly color into a study which before that had glowed with healthy tones.

I looked at Tessie. She had not changed, and the clear flush of health dyed her neck and cheeks as I frowned.

"Is it something I've done?" she asked.

"No; I've made a mess of this arm, and for the life of me I can't see how I came to paint such mud as that into the canvas," I replied.

"Don't I pose well?" she insisted.

"Of course, perfectly."

"Then it's not my fault?"

"No. It's my own."

"I'm very sorry," she said.

I told her she could rest while I applied rag and turpentine to the plague-spot on my canvas, and she went off to smoke a cigarette and look over the illustrations in the *Courier Français*.

I did not know whether it was something in the turpentine or a defect in the canvas, but the more I scrubbed the more that gangrene seemed to spread. I worked like a beaver to get it out, and yet the disease appeared to creep from limb to limb of the study before me. Alarmed, I strove to arrest it, but now the color of the flesh changed and the whole figure seemed to absorb the infection as a sponge soaks up water. Vigorously I plied palette-knife, turpentine, and scraper, thinking all the time what a séance I should hold with Duval, who had sold me the canvas; but soon I noticed that it was not the canvas which was defective, nor yet the colors of Edward.

"It must be the turpentine," I thought, angrily, "or else my eyes have become so blurred and confused by the afternoon light that I can't see straight." I called Tessie, the model. She came and leaned over my chair, blowing rings of smoke into the air.

"What *have* you been doing to it?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing," I growled; "it must be this turpentine!"

"What a horrible color it is now," she continued. "Do you think my flesh resembles green cheese?"

"No, I don't," I said, angrily, "did you ever know me to paint like that before?"

"No, indeed!"

"Well, then!"

"It must be the turpentine, or something," she admitted.

SHE walked to the window. I scraped and rubbed until I was tired, and finally picked up my brushes and hurled them through the canvas with a forcible expression, the tone alone of which reached Tessie's ears.

Hearing this she promptly began: "That's it! Swear and act silly and ruin your brushes! You have been three weeks on that study, and now look! What's the good of ripping the canvas? What creatures artists are!"

I felt about as much ashamed as I usually did after such an outbreak, and I turned the ruined canvas to the wall. Tessie helped me clean my brushes, and then danced away to get ready to go home. Then she regaled me with bits of advice concerning whole or partial loss of temper, until thinking perhaps I had been tormented sufficiently, she suddenly changed the subject.

"Everything went wrong from the time you came back from the window and talked about that horrid-looking man you saw in the church-yard," she announced.

"Yes, he probably bewitched the picture," I said, yawning. I looked at my watch.

"It's after six, I know," said Tessie, adjusting her hat before the mirror.

"Yes," I replied. "I didn't mean to keep you so long." I leaned out of the window, but recoiled with disgust, for the young man with the pasty face stood below in the church-yard. Tessie saw my gesture of disapproval, and leaned from the window.

"Is that the man you don't like?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"I can't see his face, but he does look fat and soft. Some way or other," she continued, turning to look at me, "he reminds me of a dream—an awful dream—I once had. Or," she mused, looking down at her shapely shoes, "was it a dream after all?"

"How should I know?" I smiled.

Tessie smiled in reply.

"You were in it," she said, "so perhaps you might know something about it."

"Tessie! Tessie!" I protested, "don't you dare flatter by saying that you dream about me!"

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"But I did," she insisted. "Shall I tell you about it?"

"Go ahead," I replied, lighting a cigarette.

Tessie leaned back on the open window-sill and began, very seriously:

"One night last winter I was lying in bed thinking about nothing at all in particular. I had been posing for you and I was tired out, yet it seemed impossible for me to sleep. I heard the bells in the city ring ten, eleven, and midnight. I must have fallen asleep about midnight, because I don't remember hearing the bells after that. It seemed to me that I had scarcely closed my eyes when I dreamed that something impelled me to go to the window. I rose, and, raising the sash, leaned out. Twenty-fifth Street was deserted as far as I could see. I began to be afraid; everything outside seemed so —so black and uncomfortable. Then the sound of wheels in the distance came to my ears, and it seemed to me as though that was what I must wait for.

"Very slowly the wheels approached, and, finally, I could make out a vehicle moving along the street. It came nearer and nearer, and when it passed beneath my window I saw it was a hearse. Then, as I trembled with fear, the driver turned and looked straight at me. When I awoke I was standing by the open window shivering with cold, but the black-plumed hearse and the driver were gone. I dreamed this dream again in March last, and again awoke beside the open window. Last night the dream came again. You remember how it was raining; when I awoke, standing at the open window, my night-dress was soaked."

"But where did I come into the dream?" I asked.

"You—you were in the coffin; but you were not dead."

"In the coffin?"

"Yes."

"How did you know? Could you see me?"

"No; I only knew you were there."

"Had you been eating Welsh rarebits, or lobster salad?" I began to laugh, but the girl interrupted me with a frightened cry.

"Hello! What's up?" I said, as she shrank into the embrasure by the window.

"The—the man below in the churchyard; he drove the hearse."

"Nonsense," I said; but Tessie's eyes were wide with terror. I went to the window, and looked out. The man was gone. "Come, Tessie," I urged, "don't be foolish. You have posed too long; you are nervous."

"Do you think I could forget that face?" she murmured. "Three times I saw the hearse pass below my window, and every time the driver turned and looked up at me. Oh, his face was so white and—and soft! It looked dead—it looked as if it had been dead a long time."

I induced the girl to sit down and swallow a glass of Marsala. Then I sat down beside her and tried to give her some advice.

"Look here, Tessie," I said, "you go to the country for a week or two, and you'll have no more dreams about hearses. You pose all day, and when night comes your nerves are upset. You can't keep this up. Then again, instead of going to bed when your day's work is done, you run off to picnics at Sulzer's Park, or go to the Eldorado or Coney Island, and when you come down here next morning you are fagged out. There was no real hearse. That was a soft-shell-crab dream."

She smiled faintly.

"What about the man in the churchyard?"

"Oh, he's only an ordinary, unhealthy, every-day creature."

"As true as my name is Tessie Reardon, I swear to you, Mr. Scott, that the face of the man below in the church-yard is the face of the man who drove the hearse!"

"What of it?" I said. "It's an honest trade."

"Then you think I *did* see the hearse?"

"Oh," I said, diplomatically, "if you really did, it might not be unlikely that the man below drove it. There is nothing in that."

Tessie rose, unrolled her scented handkerchief, and, taking a bit of gum from a knot in the hem, placed it in her mouth. Then, drawing on her gloves, she offered me her hand with a frank "Good-night Mr. Scott," and walked out.

CHAPTER II

THE next morning, Thomas, the bell-boy, brought me the *Herald* and a bit of news. The church next door had been sold. I thanked Heaven for it, not that I, being a Catholic, had any repugnance for the congregation next door, but because my nerves were shattered by a blatant exhorter, whose every word echoed

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through the aisles of the church as if it had been my own rooms, and who insisted on his r's with a nasal persistence which revolted my every instinct.

Then, too, there was a fiend in human shape, an organist, who reeled off some of the grand old hymns with an interpretation of his own, and I longed for the blood of a creature who could play the "Doxology" with an amendment of minor chords which one hears only in a quartet of very young undergraduates. I believe the minister was a good man, but when he bellowed, "And the Lorrd said unto Moses, the Lorrd is a man of war; the Lorrd is his name. My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sworrd!" I wondered how many centuries of purgatory it would take to atone for such a sin.

"Who bought the property?" I asked Thomas.

"Nobody that I knows, sir. They do say the gent wot owns this 'ere 'Amilton flats was lookin' at it. 'E might be a bildin' more studios."

I walked to the window. The young man with the unhealthy face stood by the church-yard gate, and at the mere sight of him the same overwhelming repugnance took possession of me.

"By-the-way, Thomas," I said, "who is that fellow down there?"

Thomas sniffed. "That there worm, sir? 'E's night-watchman of the church, sir. 'E makes me tired a-sittin' out all night on them steps and lookin' at you insultin' like. I'd 'a' punched 'is 'ed, sir—beg pardon, sir—"

"Go on, Thomas."

"One night a comin' 'ome with 'Arry, the other English boy, I sees 'im a sittin' there on them steps. We 'ad Molly and Jen with us, sir, the two girls on the tray service, an' 'e looks so insultin' at us that I up and sez, 'Wat you lookin' hat, you fat slug?'—beg pardon, sir, but that's 'ow I sez, sir. Then 'e don't say nothin', and I sez, 'Come out and I'll punch that puddin' 'ed.' Then I hopens the gate an' goes in, but 'e don't say nothin', only looks insultin' like. Then I 'its 'im one; but, ugh! 'is 'ed was that cold and mushy it ud sicken you to touch 'im."

"What did he do then?" I asked curiously.

"'Im? Nawthin'."

"And you, Thomas?"

The young fellow flushed with embarrassment, and smiled uneasily.

"Mr. Scott, sir, I ain't no coward, an' I can't make it out at all why I run. I was in the Fifth Lawncers, sir, at Tel-el-Kebir, an' was shot by the wells."

"You don't mean to say you ran away?"

"Yes, sir; I run."

"Why?"

"That's just what I want to know, sir. I grabbed Molly an' run, an' the rest was as frightened as I."

"But what were they frightened at?"

Thomas refused to answer for a while; but now my curiosity was aroused about the repulsive young man below, and I pressed him. Three years' sojourn in America had modified Thomas's cockney dialect but he was still "close."

"You won't believe me, Mr. Scott, sir!"

"Yes, I will."

"You will lawf at me, sir?"

"Nonsense!"

He hesitated. "Well, sir, it's Gawd's truth, that when I 'it 'im, 'e grabbed me wrists, sir, and when I twisted 'is soft, mushy fist one of 'is fingers come off in me 'and."

The utter loathing and horror of Thomas's face must have been reflected in my own, for he added:

"It's orful, an' now when I see 'im I just go away. 'E maikes me hill."

When Thomas had gone I went to the window. The man stood beside the church railing, with both hands on the gate; but I hastily retreated to my easel again, sickened and horrified, for I saw that the middle finger of his right hand was missing.

AT NINE o'clock Tessie appeared, with a merry "Good-morning, Mr. Scott." When she had taken her pose upon the model-stand I started a new canvas, much to her delight. She remained silent as long as I was on the drawing, but as soon as the scrape of the charcoal ceased, and I took up my fixative, she began to chatter.

"Oh, I had such a lovely time last night. We went to Tony Pastor's."

"Who are 'we'?" I demanded.

"Oh, Maggie—you know, Mr. Whyte's model—and Pinkie McCormick—we call her Pinkie because she's got that beautiful red hair you artists like so much—and Lizzie Burke."

I sent a shower of spray from the fixative over the canvas, and said, "Well, go on."

"We saw Kelly, and Baby Barnes, the skirt-dancer, and—and all the rest. I made friends with a new fellow."

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The symbol on the onyx clasp she gave me was not in any human script

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"Then you have gone back on me, Tessie?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"He's Lizzie Burke's brother, Ed. He's a perfect gen'l'man."

Then she related how Ed had come back from the stocking-mill in Lowell, Massachusetts, to find her and Lizzie grown up—and what an accomplished young man he was—and how he thought nothing of squandering half a dollar for ice-cream and oysters to celebrate his entry as clerk into the woollen department of Macy's. Before she finished I began to paint, and she resumed the pose, smiling and chattering like a sparrow. By noon I had the study fairly well rubbed in and Tessie came to look at it.

"That's better," she said.

I thought so, too, and ate my lunch with a satisfied feeling that all was going well. Tessie spread her lunch on a drawing-table opposite me, and we drank our claret from the same bottle and lighted our cigarettes from the same match. I was much attached to Tessie. I had watched her shoot up into a slender but exquisitely formed woman from a frail, awkward child. She had posed for me during the last three years, and among all my models she was my favorite.

I knew she would do what she liked, still I did hope she would steer clear of complications, because I wished her well, and then also I had a selfish desire to retain the best model I had.

I am a Catholic. When I listen to high mass, when I sign myself, I feel that everything, including myself, is more cheerful; and when I confess, it does me good. A man who lives as much alone as I do must confess to somebody. Then, again, Sylvia was Catholic, and it was reason enough for me. But I was speaking of Tessie, which is very different. Tessie also was Catholic, and much more devout than I, so, taking it all in all, I had little fear for my pretty model until she should fall in love. But *then* I knew that fate alone would decide her future for her, and I prayed inwardly that fate would throw into her path nothing but Ed Burkes and Jimmy McCormicks, bless her sweet face!

Tessie sat blowing rings of smoke up to the ceiling and tinkling the ice in her tumbler.

"Do you know that I also had a dream last night?" I observed.

"Not about that man?" she asked, laughing.

"Exactly. A dream similar to yours, only much worse."

It was foolish and thoughtless of me to say this, but you know how little tact the average painter has.

"I MUST have fallen asleep about ten o'clock," I continued, "and after a while I dreamed that I awoke. So plainly did I hear the midnight bells, the wind in the tree-branches, and the whistle of steamers from the bay, that even now I can scarcely believe I was not awake. I seemed to be lying in a box which had a glass cover. Dimly I saw the street lamps as I passed, for I must tell you, Tessie, the box in which I reclined appeared to lie in a cushioned wagon which jolted me over a stony pavement.

"After a while I became impatient and tried to move, but the box was too narrow. My hands were crossed on my breast so I could not raise them to help myself. I listened and then tried to call. My voice was gone. I could hear the trample of the horses attached to the wagon, and even the breathing of the driver. Then another sound broke upon my ears like the raising of a window-sash.

"I managed to turn my head a little, and found I could look, not only through the glass cover of my box, but also through the glass panes in the side of the covered vehicle. I saw houses, empty and silent, with neither light nor life about any of them excepting one. In that house a window was open on the first floor and a figure all in white stood looking down into the street. It was you."

Tessie had turned her face away from me and leaned on the table with her elbow.

"I could see your face," I resumed, "and it seemed to me to be very sorrowful. Then we passed on and turned into a narrow, black lane. Presently the horses stopped. I waited and waited, closing my eyes with fear and impatience, but all was silent as the grave. After what seemed to me hours, I began to feel uncomfortable. A sense that somebody was close to me made me unclose my eyes. Then I saw the white face of the hearse-driver looking at me through the coffin-lid—"

A sob from Tessie interrupted me. She was trembling like a leaf. I saw I had made a fool of myself, and attempted to repair the damage.

"Why, Tess," I said, "I only told you to

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show you what influence your story might have on another person's dreams. You don't suppose I really lay in a coffin, do you? What are you trembling for? Don't you see that your dream and my unreasonable dislike for that inoffensive watchman of the church simply set my brain working as soon as I fell asleep?"

She laid her head between her arms and sobbed as if her heart would break. What a precious triple donkey I had made of myself! But I was about to break my record. I went over and put my arm about her.

"Tessie, dear, forgive me," I said; "I had no business to frighten you with such nonsense. You are too sensible a girl, too good a Catholic to believe in dreams."

Her hand tightened on mine and her head fell back upon my shoulder, but she still trembled and I petted her and comforted her.

"Come, Tess, open your eyes and smile."

Her eyes opened with a slow, languid movement and met mine, but their expression was so queer that I hastened to reassure her again.

"It's all humbug, Tessie. You surely are not afraid that any harm will come to you because of that?"

"No," she said, but her scarlet lips quivered.

"Then what's the matter? Are you afraid?"

"Yes. Not for myself."

"For me, then?" I demanded, gayly.

"For you," she murmured, in a voice almost inaudible. "I—I care for you."

At first I started to laugh, but when I understood her a shock passed through me, and I sat like one turned to stone. This was the crowning bit of idiocy I had committed. During the moment which elapsed between her reply and my answer I thought of a thousand responses to that innocent confession. I could pass it by with a laugh, I could misunderstand her and reassure her as to my health, I could simply point out that it was impossible she could love me. But my reply was quicker than my thoughts, and I might think and think now when it was too late, for I had kissed her on the mouth.

THAT evening I took my usual walk in Washington Park, pondering over the occurrences of the day. I was thoroughly committed. There was no back-out now, and I stared the future straight in the face. I was not good, not even scrupulous, but I had no idea of deceiving either myself or Tessie. The one passion of my life lay buried in the sunlit forests of Brittany. Was it buried forever? Hope cried "No!" For three years I had been listening to the voice of Hope, and for three years I had waited for a footstep on my threshold. Had Sylvia forgotten? "No!" cried Hope.

I said that I was not good. That is true, but still I was not exactly a comic-opera villain. I had led an easy-going, reckless life, taking what invited me of pleasure, deploring and sometimes bitterly regretting consequences. In one thing alone, except my painting, was I serious, and that was something which lay hidden if not lost in the Breton forests.

It was too late now for me to regret what had occurred during the day. Whatever it had been, pity, a sudden tenderness for sorrow, or the more brutal instinct of gratified vanity, it was all the same now, and unless I wished to bruise an innocent heart my path lay marked before me. The fire and the strength, the depth of a love which I had never even suspected, with all my imagined experience in the world, left me no alternative but to respond or send her away.

Whether because I am so cowardly about giving pain to others, or whether it was that I have little of the gloomy Puritan in me, I do not know, but I shrank from disclaiming responsibility for that thoughtless kiss, and, in fact, had not time to do so before the gates of her heart opened and the flood poured forth. Others who habitually do their duty and find a sullen satisfaction in making themselves and everybody else unhappy, might have withstood it. I did not. I dared not.

After the storm had abated I did tell her that she might better have loved Ed Burke and worn a plain gold ring, but she would not hear of it, and I thought perhaps that as long as she had decided to love somebody she could not marry, it had better be me. I at least could treat her with an intelligent affection, and she could go none the worse for it. For I was decided on that point, although I knew how hard it would be.

She would either tire of the whole thing, or become so unhappy that I should have either to marry her or go away. If I married her we would be unhappy. I with a wife unsuited to me, and she with a husband unsuitable for any woman. If I went away she might either fall ill, re-

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cover, and marry some Eddie Burke, or she might recklessly or deliberately go and do something foolish. On the other hand, if she tired of my friendship, then her whole life would be before her with beautiful vistas of Eddie Burkes and marriage rings, and twins, and Harlem flats, and Heaven knows what.

As I strolled along through the trees by the Washington Arch, I decided that she should find a substantial friend in me anyway, and the future could take care of itself. Then I went into the house and put on my evening dress, for the little, faintly perfumed note on my dresser said, "Have a cab at the stage door at eleven," and the note was signed, "Edith Carmichel, Metropolitan Theater."

I took supper that night, or, rather, we took supper, Miss Carmichel and I, at Solari's, and the dawn was just beginning to gild the cross on the Memorial Church as I entered Washington Square after leaving Edith at the Brunswick. There was not a soul in the park, as I passed among the trees and took the walk which leads from the Garibaldi statue to the Hamilton apartment house, but as I passed the church-yard I saw a figure sitting on the stone steps. In spite of myself a chill crept over me at the sight of the white, puffy face, and I hastened to pass. Then he said something which might have been addressed to me or might merely have been a mutter to himself, but a sudden furious anger flamed up within me that such a creature should address me.

For an instant I felt like wheeling about and smashing my stick over his head, but I walked on, and, entering the Hamilton, went to my apartment. For some time I tossed about the bed trying to get the sound of his voice out of my ears, but could not. It filled my head, that muttering sound, like thick, oily smoke from a fat-rendering vat or an odor of noisome decay. And as I lay and tossed about, the voice in my ears seemed more distinct, and I began to understand the words he muttered. They came to me slowly, as if I had forgotten them, and at last I could make some sense out of the sounds. It was this:

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

I was furious. What did he mean by that? Then with a curse upon him and his I rolled over and went to sleep, but when I awoke later I looked pale and haggard, for I had dreamed the dream of the night before, and it troubled me more than I cared to think.

I dressed and went down into my studio. Tessie sat by the window, but as I came in she rose and put both arms around my neck for an innocent kiss. She looked so sweet and dainty that I kissed her again.

I said, "We will begin something new"; and I went into my wardrobe and picked out a Moorish costume which fairly blazed with tinsel. It was a genuine costume, and Tessie retired to the screen with it, enchanted. When she came forth again I was astonished. Her long, black hair was bound above her forehead with a circlet of turquoise. Her feet were encased in the embroidered, pointed slippers, and the skirt of her costume, curiously wrought with arabesques in silver, and held with a glittering girdle, fell to her ankles. The deep metallic blue vest, embroidered with silver, and the short Mauresque jacket, spangled and sewn with turquoises, became her wonderfully. She came up to me and held up her face, smiling. I slipped my hand into my pocket, and, drawing out a gold chain with a cross attached, dropped it over her head.

"It's yours, Tessie."

"Mine?" she faltered.

"Yours. Now go and pose." Then with a radiant smile she ran behind the screen, and presently reappeared with a little box on which was written my name.

"I had intended to give it to you when I went home tonight," she said, "but I can't wait now."

I opened the box. On the pink cotton inside lay a clasp of black onyx, on which was inlaid a curious symbol or letter in gold. It was neither Arabic nor Chinese, nor, as I found afterwards, did it belong to any human script.

"It's all I had to give you for a keepsake," she said, timidly.

I was annoyed, but I told her how much I should prize it, and promised to wear it always. She fastened it on my coat beneath the lapel.

"How foolish, Tess, to go and buy me such a beautiful thing as this," I said.

"I did not buy it," she laughed.

"Where did you get it?"

Then she told me how she had found it one day while coming from the aquarium in the Battery, how she had advertised it and watched the papers, but at last gave up all hopes of finding the owner.

"That was last winter," she said, "the

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very day I had the first horrid dream about the hearse."

I remembered my dream of the previous night but said nothing, and presently my charcoal was flying over a new canvas, and Tessie stood motionless on the model-stand.

CHAPTER III

THE day following was a disastrous one for me. While moving a framed canvas from one easel to another my foot slipped on the polished floor and I fell heavily on both wrists. They were so badly sprained that it was useless to attempt to hold a brush, and I was obliged to wander about the studio, glaring at unfinished drawings and sketches, until despair seized me and I sat down to smoke and twiddle my thumbs with rage. The rain blew against the windows and rattled on the roof of the church, driving me into a nervous fit with its interminable patter.

Tessie sat sewing by the window, and every now and then raised her head and looked at me with such innocent compassion that I began to feel ashamed of my irritation and looked about for something to occupy me. I had read all the papers and all the books in the library, but for the sake of something to do I went to the bookcases and shoved them open with my elbow. I knew every volume by its color and examined them all, passing slowly around the library and whistling to keep up my spirits.

I was turning to go into the dining room when my eye fell upon a book bound in serpent-skin standing in a corner of the top shelf of the last bookcase. I did not remember it, and from the floor could not decipher the pale lettering on the back, so I went to the smoking-room and called Tessie. She came in from the studio and climbed up to reach the book.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The King in Yellow."

I was dumbfounded. Who had placed it there? How came it in my rooms? I had long ago decided that I should never open that book, and nothing on earth could have persuaded me to buy it. Fearful lest curiosity might tempt me to open it, I had never even looked at it in bookstores. If I ever had had any curiosity to read it, the awful tragedy of young Castaigne, whom I knew, prevented me from exploring its wicked pages. I had always refused to listen to any description of it, and, indeed, nobody ever ventured to discuss the second part aloud, so I had absolutely no knowledge of what those leaves might reveal. I stared at the poisonous, mottled binding as I would at a snake.

"Don't touch it, Tessie," I said; "come down."

Of course my admonition was enough to arouse her curiosity, and before I could prevent it she took the book, and, laughing, danced off into the studio with it. I called her, but she slipped away with a tormenting smile at my helpless hands, and I followed her with some impatience.

"Tessie!" I cried, entering the library, "listen; I am serious. Put that book away. I do not wish you to open it!" The library was empty. I went into both drawing-rooms, then into the bedrooms, laundry, kitchen, and finally returned to the library and began a systematic search. She had hidden herself so well that it was half an hour later when I discovered her crouching white and silent by the latticed window in the store-room above. At the first glance I saw she had been punished for her foolishness. "The King in Yellow" lay at her feet; but the book was open at the second part.

I looked at Tessie and saw it was too late. She had opened "The King in Yellow." Then I took her by the hand and led her into the studio. She seemed dazed, and when I told her to lie down on the sofa she obeyed me without a word. After a while she closed her eyes and her breathing became regular and deep; but I could not determine whether or not she slept. For a long while I sat silently beside her, but she neither stirred nor spoke, and at last I rose and, entering the unused store-room, took the book in my least injured hand. It seemed heavy as lead; but I carried it into the studio again, and, sitting down on the rug beside the sofa, opened it and read it through from beginning to end.

When, faint with the excess of my emotions, I dropped the volume and leaned wearily back against the sofa, Tessie opened her eyes and looked at me.

WE HAD been speaking for some time in a dull, monotonous strain before I realized that we were discussing "The King in Yellow." Oh, the sin of writing such words—words which are clear as crystal, limpid and musical as bubbling springs, words which sparkle and glow like the poisoned diamonds of the

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Medicis! Oh the wickedness, the hopeless damnation, of a soul who could fascinate and paralyze human creatures with such words—words understood by the ignorant and wise alike, words which are more precious than jewels, more soothing than music, more awful than death!

We talked on, unmindful of the gathering shadows, and she was begging me to throw away the clasp of black onyx quaintly inlaid with what we now knew to be the Yellow Sign. I shall never know why I refused, though even at this hour, here in my bedroom as I write this confession, I should be glad to know *what* it was that prevented me from tearing the Yellow Sign from my breast and casting it into the fire. I am sure I wished to do so, and yet Tessie pleaded with me in vain.

Night fell, and the hours dragged on, but still we murmured to each other of the King and the Pallid Mask, and midnight sounded from the misty spires in the fog-wrapped city. We spoke of Hatur and of Cassilda, while outside the fog rolled against the blank window-panes as the cloud waves roll and break on the shores of Hali.

The house was very silent now, and not a sound came up from the misty streets. Tessie lay among the cushions, her face a gray blot in the gloom, but her hands were clasped in mine, and I knew that she knew and read my thoughts as I read hers, for we had understood the mystery of the Hyades, and the Phantom of Truth was laid. Then, as we answered each other, swiftly, silently, thought on thought, the shadows stirred in the gloom about us, and far in the distant streets we heard a sound.

Nearer and nearer it came—the dull crunching of wheels, nearer and yet nearer, and now, outside, before the door, it ceased, and I dragged myself to the window and saw a black-plumed hearse. The gate below opened and shut, and I crept, shaking, to my door, and bolted it, but I knew no bolts, no locks, could keep that creature out who was coming for the Yellow Sign. And now I heard him moving very softly along the hall. Now he was at the door, and the bolts rotted at his touch. Now he had entered. With eyes starting from my head I peered into the darkness, but when he came into the room I did not see him. It was only when I felt him envelop me in his cold, soft grasp that I cried out and struggled with deadly fury, but my hands were useless, and he tore the onyx clasp from my coat and struck me full in the face.

Then, as I fell, I heard Tessie's soft cry and her spirit fled; and even while falling I longed to follow her, for I knew that the King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle and there was only God to cry to now.

I could tell more, but I cannot see what help it will be to the world. As for me, I am past human help or hope. As I lie here, writing, careless even whether or not I die before I finish, I can see the doctor gathering up his powders and phials with a vague gesture to the good priest beside me, which I understand.

They will be very curious to know the tragedy—they of the outside world who write books and print millions of newspapers, but I shall write no more, and the father confessor will seal my last words with the seal of sanctity when his holy office is done. They of the outside world may send their creatures into wrecked homes and death-smitten firesides, and their newspapers will batten on blood and tears, but with me their spies must halt before the confessional.

They know that Tessie is dead, and that I am dying. They know how the people in the house, aroused by an infernal scream, rushed into my room, and found one living and two dead, but they do not know what I shall tell them now; they do not know that the doctor said, as he pointed to a horrible, decomposed heap on the floor—the livid corpse of the watchman from the church: "I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!"

I think I am dying. I wish the priest would—

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(Continued from page 6)

Taine, a writer worthy of note. Perhaps this is one reason why there are so few pseudo-scientific works that can be classed as literature.

Hawkins' novel, it seems to me, would make an ideal scenario for a movie and I can't help wondering what with the renewal in the general reading public's interest in the fantastic and outlandish type of fiction; sic "Superman" "Captain Marvel" etc. and a whole raft of pulps that have flooded the newsstands featuring the results of the inexhaustible imaginations of innumerable hack writers, why some venturesome Hollywood producer instead of endlessly turning out B pictures didn't investigate the possibilities of a gold mine in the fantastic fiction field. What few of those far-sighted cinematic minds that did, found that their efforts had far-reaching effects. We started years ago with "The Cabinet of Dr. Calighieri", "Metropolis" and "Rocket to The Moon". These have since taken their place in film history. The English contributed H. G. Wells' "Things to Come". While we have only "The Lost World" and "King Kong" to our credit. However, it should be noted that although these last two have similar themes, both had a phenomenal success.

The impression Hawkins' novel made on me was the deepest since 'way back in 1926 when an accident introduced me to fantastic fiction. I was in Junior High School and one of my schoolmates happened to bring a copy of the old Amazing Stories. One of my first thrills was in saving up enough money to buy the first copy of the Amazing-Story Quarterly that appeared, then featuring Edgar Rice Burroughs' latest: "The Master Mind of Mars." I shall never forget the agony I went through trying to get the second copy which reprinted Wells' "When the Sleeper Wakes." Since then my taste for the fantastic in fiction has been rather latent, reviving at the birth of your magazine, more sharply and discerningly. It was this gourmandish taste for the best in fantastic fiction that made me devour avidly each one of Merritt's novels you published. It led me also to the abject idolatry of John Taine, whose acquaintance I first made in one of those old Amazing Stories Quarterlies where his novel "White Lily" was first printed. Unfortunately for me, it was his only appearance therein.

It was while I was but half way through reading "The Iron Star" that an unfortunate accident happened. I lost the book. It would have well become a major tragedy in my life never knowing how it ended for although I have searched, there doesn't seem to be another single copy available. I say it would have been, were it not for the miraculous news of your intention to reprint it in F.F.M. I can hardly wait until the September issue appears in June so I can find out what happened to Big and Little Tom and the Doctor. In fact, I hope to hasten its arrival by including a subscription to F.F.M. with this letter.

Taine excited my admiration from the skillful way he develops his plots. His stories are the only ones which in my mind actually fit the title of your magazine, for they are really mysteries. In all except one; "Green Fire" he never reveals the fantastic agent around which his characters revolve until the very end. For this reason it is impossible to put down one of his books until the very finish.

JOHN A. SAVAGE.

131 W. 110 ST.
NEW YORK, N. Y.

GOOD SUGGESTION

I just finished reading the March '43 issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and want to say that I liked "Ark of Fire" very much. Thanks a lot for printing it! "Into the Infinite" was only fair—not as good as "The Rebel Soul." In fact I didn't even bother to finish the entire story.

Finlay sure did a beautiful job on the cover! I like this cover and the one featured on the "Burn, Witch, Burn!" issue the best. I know he could have done better on the inside illustrations, for March, though. The ones for "Ark of Fire" were below average. Maybe he spent too much time on the cover.

Your new policy is an improvement over the old, although there are a few Munsey stories I would like to have read. I hope you won't pass up stories by E. R. Burroughs and maybe a few by H. R. Haggard. Pick the ones which are out of print and hard to get. Even with your new policy I have a few kicks coming: I don't like the fact that you are a quarterly—the best fantasy magazine on the market coming out only four times a year! I'm sure you will correct this in time.

Want "Last and First Men," "Last Men in London" and "The Starmaker," all by W. O. Stapledon.

"Iron Star" sounds like a good story, I'll be waiting for it.

RONALD CLYNE.

2112 AINSLIE
CHICAGO, ILL.

OPEN LETTER TO A. MERRITT

I regret very much that the Munsey Classics are no longer to be published, and that *Famous Fantastic* has gone on a quarterly basis. Woe, Woe, Woe. Is not using the Munsey tales an editorial policy? If so, what the heck? You could search the far corners of the earth and find no better.

For years I searched libraries, bookstands and musty shelves trying to locate even a few of the old *Argosy* and *All-Story* fantasies. Occasional success, but by no means enough to satisfy my craving. Then along came *Famous Fantastic*, and *Fantastic Novels*, solving the entire problem. I reread the tales I'd read years before, and got even more pleasure out of them than when first reading. You, being editor of such a magazine, know that nothing of the present, nothing in the past could in any way equal the fantasies published by Munsey's!

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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

Surely fantasy lovers shouldn't be deprived of these masterpieces. We old-timers get as much pleasure out of rereading the old, perhaps nearly forgotten tales, as we did the first time we read them. And I know the newer readers get no less. Surely the supply was barely tapped. Merritt, England, Hall, Giesy, Cummings, Stevens, Hawthorne, Sheehan, and of later years Jack Mann—those are but a few of the real writers of fantasy. What have we to equal those authors now? Only an occasional writer will rise to those heights. Naw—I don't live in the past, I'm very progressive, but I still contend you can't find anything better than the Munsey stories!

I have no suggestions to offer you. (Laird's off the beam, eh?). I haven't seen your magazine. Haven't been able to buy it. Probably when I do see it you'll hear from me again. But—I do plead on bended knee—and I'm still young enough to bend it—to publish, at least from time to time, the stories of *Argosy* and *All-Story*.

And now here's a little open letter to A. Merritt: Mr. Merritt, why don't you take just a little time out and write again? Why don't you finish those tales you started? You're doing your fans a rank injustice. Don't you know there never was, and never will be, another writer like you? Your poetic prose, and amazing descriptions, made fantasy history.

You set a standard in fantasy fiction that will probably never be reached by another writer. Would it please you to know that I have read "The Moon Pool" nine times; "The Ship of Ishtar" eight; "The Dwellers in the Mirage" more times than I can recall; "Creep Shadow" numerous times, and "The Metal Monster" at least five times? And each story grows in beauty each time I read it. I now have only three of your tales to fall back on—"The Dwellers in the Mirage," "Creep, Shadow!" and a worn out copy of "The Ship of Ishtar." The others were lost through loaning.

I was never able to secure a copy of "The Snake Mother," although I considered it one of the finest you ever wrote. Isn't this enough to prove to you that you should write again? You have written much, I expect, that I have, unfortunately, missed reading. Is there any possible way, or place, to secure copies of everything you have written? Nothing could make me happier.

And now, Editor, comes a threat; you'll hear from me again when I've scanned the new *Fantastic Mysteries!*

G. H. Laird.

1912 South Norton,
Sioux Falls, S. D.

Editor's Note: We have good evidence that Mr. Merritt reads these pages, and we shall call his attention to the several letters addressing him concerning new material.

FROM F.F.M's POETESS

I am considerably relieved to find that F.F.M. is still coming . . . disappointed at

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such a cut in frequency of appearance. We aren't going to let you get away with that, you know . . . just as we had strong-armed you into going monthly. But until the war is over we won't say too much about that.

I am glad to read "Ark of Fire." A certain young man named Raymond Washington, of Live Oaks, Florida, is going to be very happy over this . . . he is, by the way, an infinitely better poet than I.

"Into the Infinite" had me worried for a while. I was afraid I wouldn't get to find out how it ended.

In closing, let me thank you for publishing my poem. . . . Of course you know what it means to me, to have a poem printed in F.F.M. I can do no better.

Yours in Fantasy,
NANEK.

FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES
205 E. 42ND ST., N. Y.

FROM OVERSEAS

It is high time I wrote to thank you for the steady attention you have given to my subscriptions all this dramatic year. Every issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* now stands upon my shelves, and if nowadays I have to look at them with the eye of a collector rather than of a reader, the anticipation of long hours of leisure with these classical masterpieces adds extra spice to the excitement of the future.

It seems hardly possible that three years have passed since the first issue was in our hands, but that's the march of time for you. In those three years you have given us almost the whole of A. Merritt, the entire repertoire of Austin Hall, The Darkness and Dawn trilogy, the Palos trilogy (nearly) the Radio Man trilogy, the Golden Atom duo, the first of Polaris and many a wonderful tale that was almost completely forgotten—those of Francis Stevens, for instance. My old favorite, Homer Eon Flint, is still notably absent from the gallery of masters, but with all Hall, I can quit grousing. This is a record to be proud of, and may you have many more years of publication to equal it.

Please put me down for the next Finlay portfolio, if this is an article for export. Finlay and Paul are the poetry and prose of modern magazine artistry. The one with his imaginative sense of wonder and beauty, the other with his solid realism and magnificent sense of drama. Of the two I have a sneaking preference for the Old Master, who has roused me almost since college days. But it is no more than a preference. The first of a collection of Finlays will be a fine addition to my library.

The world has changed a lot for the better since last I wrote you at length, which was the night after Pearl Harbor, I believe. As I write now the thunders of North Africa still echo in our headlines. We have looked forward to these epic days ever since the glorious and catastrophic summer of 1940. And here they are, with all the promise that we never

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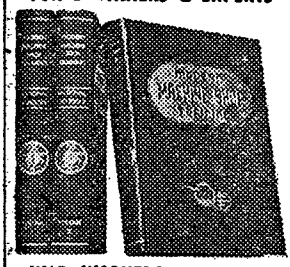

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doubted, nor is there any doubt of what will happen in 1943. By this time, next year, I believe, the shape of things to come will be handsomer than ever.

FRANK ARNOLD.
14 CRAWFORD ST.,
LONDON, W. 1, ENGLAND.

ASKS FOR C. L. MOORE

I am writing this letter after reading in the latest issue of *Astonishing Stories* that your company has taken over the publishing of my favorite magazine. None other than the world renowned *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. I will not at this time take up your time and my paper to attempt to tell you the place F.F.M. has reached with me.

Now to list my requests: First, please make no changes in F.F.M. We—I know I am voicing the sentiments of all F.F.M. fans—want no change. I know of no improvement you could make unless it would be to bring it out more often. We want none of the material being offered under the name of Fantasy by the modern school. Where may I inquire, can you find among the moderns, authors to come even remotely close to the authors of the Golden Age?

One author I might suggest—and she, so far, has not graced the pages of F.F.M.—is C. L. Moore. There is one woman that is the equal of most of the masculine authors.

I am a collector of Fantasy and have every issue of F.F.M. and F.N. that has rolled from the presses and I have them all carefully bound and placed in a hallowed nook in my collection.

Paul and Finlay are the cream of the crop.

The suspense of waiting for the final instalment of "Into the Infinite" just about wrecked my morale. To heck with all serials. If you can't get all of a story into a magazine, make the magazine bigger. Even if you have to charge more. The quality of the material is worth more as it is.

I shall keep a critical eye on your new efforts in the realms of the classics and if the standard retains their high mark my subscription will be forthcoming. If not, I shall organize a second front and cause you more worries than Hitler has now.

Now I shall retire into watchful waiting.

Yours in Fantasy,
EUGENE V. ALBRIGHT.

421½ 11TH ST.,
HUNTINGTON, W. VA.

PROTEST

Here I'd been haunting the newsstands looking for a copy of January *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*—finally I came across one, only to discover it was the March issue! I was frantic, thinking I'd missed two issues of my favorite magazine. When I discovered it had been turned into a quarterly; I was dumfounded. All I want to know is Why???

After learning to really appreciate this fine magazine which has caused me to lose my

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appetite for other types of fiction, and congratulating myself on being able to purchase one every month, you calmly turn around and announce that henceforward it will be published quarterly!

Personally I think this a gross injustice. What will we F.F.M. fans do now?

MRS. EDWIN HONKANEN.

BRUCE CROSSING,
MICH.

WANTS BINDER STORIES

I have just finished with the March, 1943, issue of F.F.M.

The Finlay cover was very lovely; it was so symbolic of "The Ark of Fire." Finlay has given F.F.M. a characteristic atmosphere with his covers which any magazine either fiction or non-fiction would envy.

Interior illustrations by Finlay were not very clear and they could be improved a great deal. Other artists which could fit in rather easily are: Paul, St. John, and Bok. St. John is very good at jungle scenes and stone age scenes; cavemen, etc.

"The Ark of Fire" by John Hawkins is one of the most moving novels that I have ever had occasion to read. There are certain passages in the story which I will never forget, such as that unforgettable toast: "May you live forever and I never die." The death of Penny and Jay, the tragic ending of O'Day and Peter Paul, the strange love story of Hill and Theta De Spain; all these things and many more serve to make this an unforgettable story of the future. "Into the Infinite" by Hall lived up to its preceding three installments to end in a climax which makes one wish for more. Thanks a lot for printing this concluding installment.

If you are going to feature some new material, get Eando Binder to do a novel or two. He has written some very fine novels which will never be forgotten such as "Spawn of Eternal Thought," "Lords of Creation," "After An Age" and many others.

If by chance this letter happens to be printed, I would like anyone having issues of *"Argosy"* previous to 1940 to tell me. Also, if anyone cares to correspond with me, I'll answer all letters.

RAYMOND GRUMBO.

ST. VINCENT,
MINN.

"NEW" F.F.M. BETTER!

I think the "new" F.F.M. greatly surpasses the old. The "Ark of Fire" was well worth printing. I found enjoyment and suspense in it.

Next issue's novel sounds even better, if such a thing is possible. Finlay's cover struck me as being rather poor on the March issue, though his interiors, I believe, surpass anything he has ever done before. I hope Stanton Coblentz writes a long novel for you.

H. LOREN SINN.

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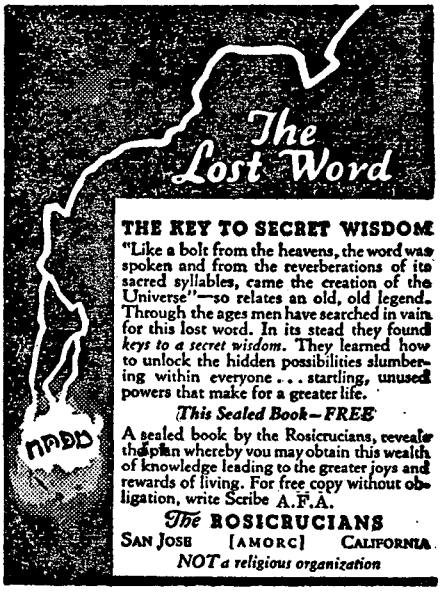

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- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ R. R. Section Foreman
- ☐ R. R. Signalman ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Shipfitting ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines
- ☐ Steam Fitting
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Telegraphy ☐ Telephony
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Welding, Gas and Electric
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

BUSINESS COURSES

- ☐ *Accounting* ☐ *Advertising*
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Cartooning ☐ Civil Service
- ☐ *College Preparatory*
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Illustrating
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ C. P. Accounting
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Managing Men at Work
- ☐ Railway Postal Clerk
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Showcard and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Traffic Management

HOME ECONOMICS COURSES

- ☐ Advanced Dressmaking
- ☐ Foods and Cookery
- ☐ Home Dressmaking
- ☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing
- ☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering

Name.....*Age*.....*Address*.....

City.....*State*.....*Present Position*.....

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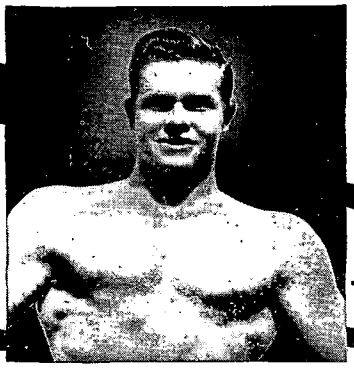

J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner.
This is an ordinary snapshot of one of Charles Atlas' Californian pupils.

CHARLES ATLAS,
115 East 23rd Street,
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I want proof that your system of DYNAMIC TENSION will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your FREE BOOK—"Everlasting Health and Strength"—and full details of your 7-DAY trial offer.

Name J. G. O'Brien
(Please print or write plainly)
ADDRESS 264 Ellsworth Street
City S. F. STATE Cal.

This is coupon O'Brien sent to get FREE Book. Yours is below—clip it NOW!

...and Here's the Handsome Prize-Winning Body I Gave Him!

J. G. O'BRIEN saw my coupon. He clipped and mailed it. He got my free book and followed my instructions. He became a New Man. NOW read what he says:

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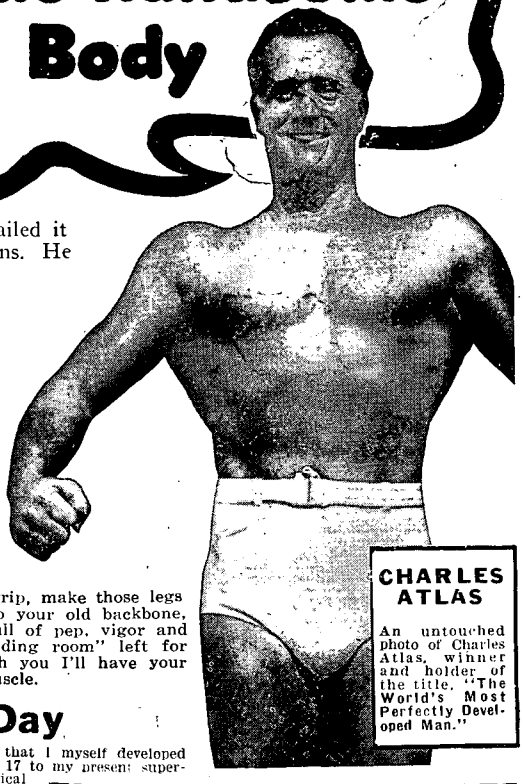
"I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN"— *Charles Atlas*

I don't care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE. I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle.



CHARLES ATLAS
An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical *natural* method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—*my way*. I give you *no gadgets or contraptions to fool with*. You learn to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension."* You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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UP TO $10.00 PER YEAR
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50 to 100 SUCCESSIVE SHAVES ON ONE BLADE!

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Simple, complete instructions for use on every *SPEE-D-HONE*. But the important thing is to get *SPEE-D-HONE* from your dealer now. Only 10c for months of the best shaving you've ever had.

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